

**vanderlyle crybaby cry**

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# vanderlyle crybaby cry

by [bonesandthebees \(bonesandcacti\)](#)

## Summary

*"If you heard what we said, then you know what Puffy told me about you," Tommy said, giving Wilbur a sticky sweet smile that was more akin to him baring his teeth.*

*Wilbur's face must've reflected the way his heart skipped a beat at that, because Tommy's grin widened now that he'd found a thread to pull.*

*"So?" Wilbur asked, struggling to act like he didn't care about that part of the conversation.*

*"So, I want to know what's wrong with you."*

*The thread tugged right in the center of his chest, and Wilbur wondered if this was what it was like to unravel.*

or, Wilbur is only a few months away from getting his degree when he has a mental breakdown and is unwillingly pulled out of his classes. With nothing to fill his days, Phil gets Wilbur a part time job at a local bookstore, where he finds himself getting trained by a loud-mouthed teenager who hates his guts right off the bat. Great. All he wants to do is graduate, but now he has to deal with a seventeen year old trying to get him fired. Thanks Phil.

But somehow, this kid ends up being exactly what Wilbur needs.

## Notes

hello everyone I am here with a new au for you all!

so this thing is entirely prewritten, expect updates every other day I think? maybe every day? idk we'll see how it goes depending on my mood and how fast my beta gets through the rest of this

I've been writing this for the past month so I'm super happy to finally be getting it out there. I really hope you guys enjoy this one :)

(also, just a standard note, as always I base my characterizations off of the dream smp characters and not the irl people)

anyway, PLEASE READ THE TAGS ON THIS BEFORE YOU READ! this fic deals with a lot of serious issues, so watch for my TWs in the authors notes of each chapter and stay safe!

TWs for this chapter: talk of suicide and a past suicide attempt, mentions of alcohol and drug overdose

# **i am not my rosy self (left my roses on my shelf)**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“People are saying you tried to kill yourself.”

It wasn't an accusation, but it wasn't a question either. The sentence was said with the same kind of gentleness Wilbur had come to expect from Niki's soft voice, which was why the blunt edge to what she was saying should have come as a surprise to him.

Should have. It didn't though. Word got around, especially on a small, private college campus like theirs. Of course Niki was going to say something about it.

“I didn't try to kill myself,” Wilbur corrected her, his boots scuffing for purchase against the slick tiles of the roof. He lifted the cigarette to his mouth, the warm smoke coating the back of his throat as he let it fill the empty space in his chest.

Grey clouds curled from his lips, and he watched the wisps float in front of the skyline of dark houses barely illuminated by yellow squares of light spilling from the windows. Suddenly, a slim hand was stuck out in front of him, and he handed the cigarette to Niki's waiting fingers.

“You downed an entire bottle of aspirin and chased it with an entire bottle of vodka,” Niki pointed out, bringing the cigarette to her own lips to take a drag.

Wilbur clenched his jaw, having heard those words repeated to him over and over far too many times for his comfort.

“I had a headache,” he tried to explain, watching the grey smoke curl up and around her blossom pink hair. “I just- I wasn't thinking straight, and I took too much.”

She just hummed at his explanation. It was clear she didn't believe him.

Wilbur wasn't sure if he believed himself either.

The seconds ticked by like hours. A cool breeze washed over the roof, carrying the scent of the cigarette away from the two of them. Niki brought it up to her lips a second time, her steely eyes focused on the skyline.

“You don't smoke,” Wilbur pointed out after a minute or so had passed.

Niki shrugged and handed the cigarette back to him. When Wilbur took another drag, the taste of ash was thick on his tongue. It was getting close to the filter.

“And you didn't try to kill yourself,” Niki shot back, her voice still as soft and nonjudgemental as ever.

She wasn't upset with him. She wasn't trying to pry him for answers. She was just stating the obvious. Calling him out without being cruel about it.

That was the thing Wilbur had always liked about Niki. Her kindness was all encompassing, but she didn't take bullshit.

Sighing, Wilbur let the cigarette burn until the skin around his fingers was starting to blister. He dropped it onto the roof, stomping it out with the heel of his boot.

Without the cigarette, the breeze whipping over the rooftop was beginning to cut through his sweater, icy fingers gripping his arms like an invisible spectre was looming right over his shoulder.

"So what are your plans now?" Niki finally asked after a few minutes of silence. "Are you gonna take another gap year?"

Wilbur shrugged, wrapping his arms around himself. "I'm not sure if I'd call it a gap year. It's more like a 'my counselor forced me to pull out of all of my classes against my will'."

"I thought you'd be relieved," Niki commented, bringing her knees up to her chest. "I can't remember the last time you told me you were actually enjoying one of your classes."

"It's not about the fact that I hate what I'm studying," Wilbur said, pushing his hair back from his face when the wind blew it in his eyes. "It's that I'm so close to being out of this hellhole. I literally only have one more quarter and I can graduate with that stupid fucking degree, and never have to think about poli sci again."

Niki considered that for a moment. Then, she scooted closer to Wilbur on the roof, so their sides were pressed together.

"What's the point in getting a degree if you're never gonna use it?" Niki asked, resting her head on his shoulder. Compared to the freezing wind, Niki was a beacon of warmth. "I mean, I know for a lot of kids they have to finish their degrees because they can't afford additional tuition. But you don't have to pay tuition because of Phil. So why haven't you switched?"

*Why haven't you switched?*

Well that was the million dollar question, now wasn't it?

Dozens of pre-thought out responses flitted through his head at Niki's question, considering he'd been asked this many times before.

*I want to go into politics, and a different degree doesn't make much sense.*

*I'm so close to finishing, I might as well just stick it out.*

*I don't know what I'd want to switch to.*

*I'm just being dramatic. It's really not as bad as I make it sound.*

There was a real answer though. The word ‘disappointment’ hung heavily on the tip of his tongue, just waiting for him to take the push and admit it out loud.

But even with Niki’s comforting warmth, and the smell of her flowery shampoo chasing away the lingering scent of the cigarette smoke, he couldn’t find the courage to make himself form the sentence that sat in his mind.

Instead, he just shrugged.

Niki frowned, knowing full well there was a reason he wasn’t telling her. But bless her, Niki had a great sense for knowing when to push him, and when not to push him. So after a few tense beats, she dropped the frown.

“If you’re not gonna be in classes, what are you gonna do?” She asked, bringing it back around to her previous question.

“According to my new therapist, I should get a job. Not a full time one, but a low stress, part time gig. So that I have something to ‘keep me occupied’ since I’m gonna be living at my dad’s again,” Wilbur told her, unable to keep the cigarette-stained bitterness out of his tone. “Phil talked to a friend of his, and he got me a job at that bookstore all the classics and lit students go to when they don’t wanna get ripped off by the student bookstore.”

“Oh! I like that place actually,” Niki said, a small smile flashing across her face. “I know the owner. She’s a really sweet person. You’ll like having her as a boss, I think.”

“I hope so,” Wilbur muttered, dragging a hand down his face. “My first shift is tomorrow.”

“Well, I’ll make sure to come visit you at some point when you’re working there,” Niki told him, shifting away from him so she could push to her feet. “I’ll bring cookies.”

“Thank you,” Wilbur said softly, knowing that even if he didn’t want her to stop at the bookstore, she would do it anyway.

The small smile still painted across her face saddened to something almost painful to look at.

“We should get going, Wilbur,” she told him, holding up her phone to show him it was nearly two in the morning.

“You can go. I’ll stay up here,” Wilbur said, even though he was already shivering again without her.

Niki gave him a look. No words needed to be said. Wilbur knew exactly what the look meant. She didn’t trust him to be up here by himself.

Swallowing down the anger bubbling up inside of him, Wilbur pushed to his feet as well, knowing it wouldn’t be fair to Niki to protest this. So instead, he just muttered, “I just had a headache,” before sparing one last longing glance towards the city skyline. Then, he followed her to the fire escape, and they made their way inside.



The door to the bookstore chimed as Wilbur pushed it open.

He was immediately engulfed with the smell of old paper and dust, along with the faint scent of a sweet candle burning somewhere he couldn't see. The floor was made of light oak wood, and the walls were covered with darker wooden shelves.

The bookshelf nearest to him had a sign taped to the front that read **Are you a student? Look over here!** Eyeing the titles, Wilbur recognized many of them from Phil's syllabus, all listed at prices far lower than what Wilbur knew they were being sold at the campus bookstore for.

Stepping over, he skimmed a hand over the back of a copy of *The Odyssey*, when a voice jolted him out of his thoughts.

"Can I help you?"

Turning around, Wilbur found himself face to face with a teenage boy. He had messy blonde hair and a scowl twisting his expression, and while Wilbur wasn't exactly an expert in retail, he was pretty sure you weren't supposed to look at customers like that.

"Uh-" Wilbur was taken off guard by the boy's hostile expression, and stammered as he tried to explain why he was here. "I'm supposed to, um, talk to someone named Puffy?"

The boy blinked, and Wilbur noticed he had a nametag pinned to his shirt, reading *Tommy* in messy handwriting. Tommy frowned and looked like he was internally debating telling Wilbur to fuck off. But after a few beats of silence, Tommy sighed and turned on his heel. "Fine. Stay here, I'll be right back."

He disappeared between the bookshelves, and Wilbur shoved his hands in his pocket, wondering how hellish working at this place could be to make the boy act like *that*. Of course, it was possible he was just naturally prickly, but Wilbur was already getting a bad feeling about his new 'career'.

As his eyes skimmed over the book titles again, Wilbur then heard a soft 'meow' come from the ground, and felt something warm brush against his legs. Glancing down, Wilbur's eyes widened when he saw an all grey cat with bright amber eyes winding around his legs.

"Oh hey there, sweetie," Wilbur whispered, crouching down and reaching out for the cat. The cat immediately shoved its head into his hands, and he cooed as he ran his fingers over its soft fur.

He had always liked cats, but never felt like he was in a good place to get one of his own. Phil was allergic, so he wasn't able to get one when he was still living at home. Then when he was in his first few years of university, he had a hard enough time taking care of himself, let alone another living creature. And obviously when he took his gap year he was living out of a van, which wasn't a very good place to keep a cat.

Wilbur continued to run his hands down the cat's back, and it pressed itself closer to him, wanting more attention. As he began to rub behind its ears, he heard footsteps approaching,

and glanced up to see Tommy and another woman standing above him.

“Her name is Clementine,” the woman told him with a kind smile, a drastic contrast to Tommy’s (seemingly permanent) scowl. “It seems like she likes you.”

Flushing a bit at having been distracted by a cat when he was supposed to be here for a job, Wilbur straightened back up. “Well, uh, I guess that’s good for me because I really like cats,” Wilbur said, laughing awkwardly. He cringed at himself, knowing he wasn’t usually this bad interacting with people. But considering he’d had a difficult past few weeks, you couldn’t really blame him for being a bit stiff. “Anyway, I’m Wilbur Soot, Phil Soot’s son. I believe my father talked to you about me?”

The woman, who Wilbur could now see had a mess of wild curls split-dyed brown and white, smiled at him and offered a hand. “Nice to meet you, Wilbur. I’m Puffy, and I’ve been a friend of your dad’s for a few years now.”

Wilbur shook her hand, noting the rough calluses on her palms. “So I’ve heard. He sends you his syllabus before every quarter so you can stock the correct books, right?”

Puffy nodded. “He does. I actually got his syllabus for the next quarter a few days ago, so that reminds me that I need to go order those books.” Letting go of his hand, Puffy then tucked a stray white curl behind her ear, and turned to Tommy. “This is Tommy. He’s been working for me for about a year now, so he’ll be the one training you.”

Immediately, Tommy’s eyes widened. “Wait, you’re *hiring* him?”

“Yeah, I told you about him yesterday,” Puffy said, nudging his shoulder.

Groaning, Tommy leaned into her sighed like a dramatic child. “But why do I have to be the one to train him? I can order the inventory while you handle him!”

Wilbur squirmed where he stood, unsure of what to say when this teenager clearly didn’t want to be stuck with him. It’s not like it was his fault. He already hated the idea of being trained by someone so much younger than him, but it wasn’t like he had a choice.

Snorting, Puffy flicked his forehead and pushed him off of her. “Stop complaining so much, you little shit. Training isn’t hard and you know it.”

“Fucking hell, fine,” Tommy huffed, folding his arms over his chest. He looked back at Wilbur, and the scowl returned. “Follow me to the back and I’ll get you a name tag.”

“Good job, Tommy,” Puffy praised him, patting his shoulder as she turned away from the two of them. “I’ll man the register while you give him the tour and a rundown of his duties.”

“Yeah yeah, I know,” Tommy grumbled, waving for Wilbur to follow him as he headed back towards the shelves.

With one last wave, Puffy disappeared, while Wilbur was led into the twisting labyrinth of bookshelves. Although some of the shelves were tall enough to nearly hit the ceiling, Tommy



didn't seem lost at all among them, instead weaving between the dark wood like he could run it blindfolded.

Behind them, Wilbur heard another meow, and glanced back to see Clementine following them.

"Like Puffy said, that's Clementine. She's just following you because you're new and she wants to see what you're doing," Tommy told him without turning around, darting to the right and leading Wilbur to a plain door with a plaque labeled 'staff' on the front.

"Is she Puffy's cat?" Wilbur asked, ignoring the temptation to turn around and pick up the sweet little thing.

Tommy shrugged. "I guess she technically is, but she lives in the store, not at Puffy's house. Plus, I'm the one who named her, so if anything I think we get joint custody of her."

For some reason, the idea of this prickly, teenage boy naming a cat something as sweet as Clementine made Wilbur want to laugh. He was pretty sure Tommy wouldn't be too happy with him if he spoke that thought out loud though, so he forced himself to stay quiet.

Tommy held the door open to the staff room, not blinking twice when Clementine ran in right behind Wilbur. The room itself was rather plain, with a small kitchenette, a small table with a few scattered chairs, and another door in the back corner labeled 'stock'.

Walking over to the kitchenette, Tommy pulled open a drawer and set an empty name tag on the counter. Then, he pulled a sharpie out of another drawer, and held it out to Wilbur.

"Write your name on that and put it on your shirt," Tommy told him.

Nodding, Wilbur did as he was told, making an effort to write his name as neatly as possible. Once he figured it was good enough, he pinned it to the front of his sweater, and Tommy scowled again.

"Who the hell names their kid Wilbur?" Tommy questioned. "It sounds so old."

Wilbur frowned. "My parents did?"

Tommy snorted and shoved the sharpie back in the drawer. "You should ask them why they decided to name you after the pig from *Charlotte's Web*."

Rolling his eyes, Wilbur leaned against the counter, reaching out a hand to pet Clementine when she hopped up next to him. "I'd ask if I could, but considering I haven't seen my birth parents since I was three, it's not really possible."

That made Tommy pause. He blinked a few times, giving Wilbur a second once over like he was trying to see if he was joking or not. It's not like Wilbur minded talking about it all too much. He didn't remember his birth parents at all, so it wasn't something he got upset about.

Still, he knew it made other people uncomfortable because they felt bad for him, so he usually didn't bring it up unless someone asked. But Tommy was already getting under his

skin, so it was kind of satisfying to make the kid squirm.

“Foster system?” Tommy asked after a few beats.

Wilbur shrugged. “I was there for a bit. Got adopted when I was eleven.”

Tommy was silent for a beat, as if there was something he wanted to say, but wasn’t sure if he should. Wilbur waited, running his fingers over Clementine’s back.

Then, Tommy shook his head, and moved towards the stockroom. “Cool. Anyway, this is the stockroom. You’re gonna be pretty damn familiar with this place because stocking and organizing is gonna be most of the shit you do.”

Huh. Wilbur had to admit, it was refreshing not to see any pained sympathy for once, with Tommy just letting the conversation move on normally.

After that, Tommy took Wilbur on a full tour of the shop. He showed Wilbur the stockroom, pointing out the shelves he would probably be pulling books from most often, and telling him when they usually got deliveries for more inventory. Then, he brought Wilbur back to the main part of the store, giving him the rundown on how to talk to customers to get them to buy something.

You had to try and provide suggestions, but not be pushy about it. More than anything, just attempt to help the customer find what they’re looking for, and if they want to be left alone then don’t bother pushing it too hard. It sounded simple enough, but anxiety ate away at his insides the longer he thought about it.

It’s not like it was hard for Wilbur to talk to people. In fact, when Tommy shoved him towards a customer to tell him to get some real practice in, Wilbur was able to give her a recommendation that she immediately bought, which was a much better result than he expected for his first attempt. But Wilbur still felt like he had zero clue what he was doing, and Tommy was pretty shit at giving advice, so it’s not like he was much help either.

“I guess you’re not terrible at this,” Tommy shrugged when Wilbur walked back to his side after grabbing a book off the top shelf for a rather short girl.

“Thanks,” Wilbur huffed, folding his arms over his chest as his eyes skimmed the visible shelves. “Customer service was always my *dream*,” he drawled sarcastically.

Tommy scowled at him. “What, you don’t wanna be here?”

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. “Who would? I have way better shit to do than working retail.”

That seemed to be the wrong thing to say, because Tommy’s expression immediately darkened. “Why the hell are you here then if you didn’t want this job?”

“Because my dad is making me.”

“So you don’t even need the money or anything? You’re just doing this because your dad got pissed at you and decided to punish you by making you work?” Tommy asked. The question

was acidic, spat with a vitriol that startled Wilbur even after having gotten to know Tommy's brand of hostility over the past hour and a half.

Anger stirred inside of him. Tommy didn't know what the fuck he was talking about.

"My dad didn't get pissed at me," Wilbur snapped. "I just- I needed something to do, so he set this up for me."

"Oh boohoo, you're a poor little rich kid who got handed a job by his dad. I feel *so* bad for you."

Tommy was glaring at him with a kind of viciousness that Wilbur hadn't seen anyone look at him with in a while. In a way, it was exhilarating for someone to be pissed at him. Everyone seemed to handle him with protective gloves, terrified of saying one wrong thing and making him shatter into a million pieces. Tommy didn't care about hurting his feelings, and the familiar heat of anger rising in his chest was addictive now that it was matched by someone else.

"You don't know a fucking thing about my life," Wilbur hissed, taking a step towards Tommy. "I have my own reasons for being here, but just because you like this job doesn't mean I have to."

"You don't even realize how fucking lucky you are." Tommy moved forward at the same time he did, and Wilbur flinched when Tommy's face was suddenly right in front of his own. "I had to fight so goddamn hard to get this job. Do you know how hard it was to convince Puffy to hire me, a seventeen year old, over any of you stupid college students? I had to practically beg her to give me a chance, and then I had to work my ass off to make sure she kept me around. And here you are, getting handed this job on a silver fucking platter, and you don't even want it!"

"What, is customer service your grand dream in life?" Wilbur snarked, raising an eyebrow at Tommy.

Tommy scoffed. "Believe me, I'd love to go to college like you, but some of us have bills to pay, asshole."

Now that made Wilbur falter. If Tommy was seventeen, what kind of bills could he have to pay? Maybe he was trying to pay off a car his parents made him buy himself? Or maybe... shit, did he need to help his parents pay the bills?

Oh shit. Well now Wilbur felt like an asshole.

"I-"

"I don't want to hear it. I'm sick of this shit," Tommy huffed, spinning on his heel and storming away from him. Wilbur half-expected Tommy to go up to the register to complain to Puffy about him, but instead, he beelined straight for the backroom, slamming the door behind him with a force that echoed through the entire shop.

Wilbur was now left alone, and felt horribly exposed even though no one was looking his way. From this vantage point, he could see Puffy craning her neck over the counter, frowning as she stared at the door to the backroom. When her eyes flickered to Wilbur though, he quickly glanced away, pretending not to be paying attention in a vain hope that she wouldn't ask him what happened.

It seemed he lucked out, because she didn't call him over. He took it upon himself to help another lost looking customer, and while he was listening to the guy ask where he could find the new *Twilight* book, from the corner of his eye he saw Tommy walk out of the backroom.

He looked a bit less pissed than before, but Wilbur could still practically see the storm cloud swelling above his head as he marched straight to the register. Wilbur did his best to ignore Puffy and Tommy talking in hushed whispers because he had to focus on the customer, but internally he was panicking at the idea that he was going to get fired on his first day.

Again, it's not like Wilbur wanted the job. But he knew Phil had pulled strings to get him this, and the idea of going home and having to admit that he'd gotten fired because he bitched to a coworker made him want to shrivel up and hide under a rock. If anything, that would just make it harder for Wilbur to get Phil to let him re-enroll in his classes, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for Wilbur to find the book the customer was looking for. Once he handed it off to the guy, he practically raced to the register, and hid behind a nearby shelf to see if he could overhear what they were talking about.

"I'm telling you, you need to fire him," Tommy sounded like he was attempting to whisper, but was doing a pretty shit job of it, and Wilbur winced as his fears were confirmed. "He's such a fucking asshole, Puffy. He doesn't even want to work here! He told me!"

"Tommy, I get your frustration, but I can't fire him," Puffy said in a much softer voice that Wilbur had to strain to hear.

"Why not though?" Tommy whined. "Don't you want employees that actually, y'know, at least need the money?"

Puffy sighed, and although he couldn't see her, Wilbur imagined her springy curls deflating like an animated character. "Wilbur's situation is... difficult. His dad called in a favor, and while he didn't give me a lot of details, from what I gathered Wilbur needs this job more than he realizes."

Wilbur stiffened, his spine bumping lightly against the shelf behind him. Phil told the fucking *bookshop owner*? What the hell happened to privacy?

"Puffy, that doesn't make any sense," Tommy said, although he sounded a bit less angry than before.

"It's not my place to share what his dad told me, but he's dealing with some shit. I can't fire him for not wanting to work here, because if I was in his position I wouldn't wanna work

here either,” Puffy explained, and Wilbur wanted to curl up into a ball in the darkest corner he could find.

It was pity. Fucking *pity*. Of course he should’ve expected that, but he thought Phil had just called in a favor without giving any details. But no, Puffy was only keeping him on because she felt bad for him.

“So what, I’m just supposed to deal with his shit attitude?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Puffy said, and Wilbur dug his nails into the palm of his hand as hard as he could. “I wouldn’t worry though. I think he’ll get better once he gets used to things.”

“I doubt it. He’s a fucking bitch and I don’t think that’s gonna change,” Tommy muttered, and Wilbur winced.

“Tommy, I think that’s a little ironic coming from you,” Puffy pointed out, her tone holding a sharp edge now. “You know full well you don’t always give off great first impressions.”

Well damn. That was kind of harsh.

Tommy didn’t seem that surprised by Puffy’s comment though. “Okay, but that’s different-”

“No, it’s really not,” Puffy cut him off, although her tone had softened again. “Look, all I’m saying is, give him some time to adjust. If he’s not doing his job correctly, or is going out of his way to antagonize you, then we can revisit the discussion. But for now, he’s staying, got it?”

There was a loud groan. “Fine. But if he’s gonna be a bitch to me, I’m gonna be a bitch to him.”

Puffy said something too quiet for Wilbur to make out, and then Wilbur heard footsteps coming his way. Straightening up, he nearly sprinted back to where Tommy had left him, and tried to pretend like he’d been there the entire time when Tommy reappeared from the labyrinth of shelves.

Tommy didn’t say anything as he resettled himself next to Wilbur, although the storm hadn’t left his eyes as he glowered at the wall. His frustration was so palpable, Wilbur could practically feel it bristling over his skin. But he pretended not to notice it as he fought to keep his face neutral while he ran the conversation he’d just overheard in his mind again.

Puffy knew what happened, and had hired him entirely out of pity. Phil didn’t respect his privacy at all. Tommy hated him already and wanted him to be fired.

This was probably the worst first day at a new job Wilbur had ever had.



“So Wil, how was your first day of work?”

Staring at the mashed potatoes and chicken that sat on his plate, Wilbur bit back a sigh at the question he really should have expected.

There was the soft clinking of silverware against glass as Phil, Wilbur, and Techno ate their dinners. The air was heavy with the smell of garlic, intermingling with the faint smell of his own cologne that was still stuck to the edge of his collar.

Despite the fact that he hadn't eaten anything since the piece of toast he'd had this morning, the longer Wilbur stared at his food, the less hungry he felt.

"It was fine," Wilbur muttered, forcing himself to scoop up a forkful of potato.

He didn't offer any more than that. The soft clinking filled the air between the three of them, but Wilbur could feel the weight of their stares on him.

"Just fine?" Phil pushed, keeping his voice as gentle as he could. It was as if his voice had been permanently set to that kind of softness ever since Phil had driven Wilbur home from the hospital, hands white-knuckled as they had gripped the steering wheel. In a way, it made Wilbur feel like he was some kind of scared animal. As if Phil thought that if he spoke too loudly, or moved too quickly, Wilbur was going to make a break for it.

"I mean, it was work," Wilbur answered after another beat, knowing Phil probably wanted something solid from him. "Got trained, sold a few books, just normal retail shit."

While Wilbur could've told him about the fight with Tommy, or about the conversation he overheard, he was so mentally exhausted from the entire day he just didn't have the energy to dredge all that up right now.

"Did Puffy train you?" Techno cut in, his voice distinctly lacking the purposeful gentleness that Phil had. That wasn't to say Techno was speaking in a harsh tone. It was just the natural gruffness his voice always carried, making it near impossible to be compared to anything *soft*.

Wilbur almost laughed at that. No, she hadn't trained him, and that was probably the worst part of it all. If she had trained him, his only coworker wouldn't have it out for him now, and at least he'd be oblivious to the fact that she was only keeping him on staff out of pity.

"No, I talked to her briefly before she handed me off to this teenager who I guess has worked there for a while," Wilbur explained, taking a sip of his water. "The kid had a temper though, so I think he hates me now."

Techno huffed quietly at that. "That's gotta be a new record for how long it's taken you to make an enemy."

Even though the statement was clearly meant as a joke, Wilbur still scowled at his older brother.

"Ah yes, so the fact that my only coworker at my new job hates me is something funny," he snapped without thinking. "Not like he's the one directly reporting to Puffy about my

performance.”

Again, Wilbur really didn’t want to dredge all this up right now. He was exhausted, and getting into a fight with his family wasn’t going to do him any favors at that moment.

But there was something about sitting at this dinner table, listening to the clinking of silverware and feeling his brother and father’s eyes lingering on him at all times like they were just waiting for him to burst into tears or something, that made his skin prickle and gave him the urge to lash out.

“Wilbur, I don’t think he meant it like that,” Phil jumped in, trying to do damage control.

Techno didn’t comment, only lifting up his fork to take another bite of potatoes.

“Whatever, I don’t fucking care how he meant it.” Wilbur slumped back against the chair and shot a glare at Phil. “I am pissed about how you told Puffy what happened with me though.”

If he was going to explode, might as well call out the thing that was most on his mind at the moment.

It was almost comical how quickly the blood drained from Phil’s face. “What did she say to you?”

“She didn’t say anything to me. I overheard her talking with the fucking kid about why she couldn’t fire me, because I’m ‘going through shit’.”

Techno was very pointedly keeping his eyes on his food, while Phil looked like he was about to start sweating. “Look, Wil, I didn’t tell her specifically what happened. I just wanted to give her at least some explanation for why I wanted you to get a job so quickly, and she’s an old friend of mine so-”

“It doesn’t matter! That’s personal, and you had no right to tell her anything,” Wilbur snapped.

Sighing, Phil dragged a hand down his face. “You’re right, I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

Huffing, Wilbur let his fork clatter onto the plate. “This whole thing is so fucking stupid anyway. I shouldn’t even have to waste my time with this job. I should be trying to finish my degree.”

Phil took a breath, pausing to make sure he was going to say the right thing—the correct thing. The thing that wouldn’t tip Wilbur over the edge. Because that’s where they thought he was, right? On the edge?

“You know your counselor and I both agreed you need to take some time off of school,” Phil told him, still in that same, soothing a scared animal type of voice.

“I’m an adult. I should be allowed to make those decisions for myself,” Wilbur snapped, the prickling growing stronger over his arms.

“You are an adult and you have a right to make your own choices, but sometimes for your own... well, sometimes you can’t see things clearly,” Phil explained, clearly struggling to figure out how to avoid voicing the elephant in the room.

The laughter that burst out of his chest was like nails dragging along a chalkboard. “Fucking hell, can we just say the goddamn word?”

It was almost satisfying in a way. To give them what they were expecting. To crack open the bitterness that had been flowing through him ever since he woke up in that stupid fucking hospital bed, letting it pour out from his lips like blood.

When Phil and Techno were both silent, Wilbur pushed on.

“You don’t trust me because you think I tried to commit suicide,” Wilbur said, his voice echoing off the walls now. “And now you’re so goddamn scared to even talk to me because you think I’m gonna go jump off a fucking bridge! But I’ve told you both, I didn’t try to kill myself. I’m perfectly fucking fine.”

“Are you still trying to say you just had a headache?” Techno spoke up, narrowing his eyes at Wilbur.

“Yes!” Wilbur insisted, even though he could feel the way his lips twitched around the words. “I was fucking drunk and stupid and didn’t realize how much aspirin-”

“No matter how drunk you are, I don’t think anyone could make that mistake with an entire bottle,” Techno pointed out, his usually flat voice now tight. “Not to mention, you could’ve given yourself alcohol poisoning on top of it with the vodka.”

“Now that’s just called drinking too much,” Wilbur argued, leaning back in his seat. “That’s something college students do, y’know? We drink and party—it’s not my fault you spent your undergraduate years with a stick up your ass.”

Techno stared at him for a moment, while Phil looked between his two sons at a complete loss for words.

Then,

“What were you even doing that night, Wilbur?” Techno asked, the quiet question reminiscent of a gavel slamming down. “You say college students drink and party, but you were the only person in your room. Your roommates only came in when they heard something slam and you didn’t respond because you’d collapsed.” His dark gaze met Wilbur’s head on, and Wilbur hated how it felt like Techno could look into his very soul with those eyes that were so brown, they were nearly red. “If you weren’t with anyone, then what were you celebrating with the vodka?”

*Papers scattered all around. Another book flung open on top of his bed. His grades pulled up on his laptop screen, the harsh blue light casting his bed in an eerie glow.*



*The vodka was like rubbing alcohol as it slid down his throat. It was rancid, but it was dulling the constant throbbing in his head that only got worse the more he stared at the papers and books and assignments and grades and and and-*

Scowling, Wilbur decided he didn't need any more of this shit. He stood up from the table in one smooth motion.

"None of your goddamn business," Wilbur hissed.

"I think it is my business since I'm your brother and all, and if you want me to believe that you legitimately just wanted to get rid of a headache, you're gonna have to give me a way better story than that."

"Techno, I think that's-"

Wilbur curled his hand into a fist at his side. "Fuck you, Technoblade," he said, cutting Phil off.

Then, ignoring Phil's weak attempts at getting him to stay, Wilbur stormed out of the kitchen and back to his room.

## Chapter End Notes

tfw you piss off your coworker so badly on your first day of work that he tries to convince your boss to fire you

wilbur is not having a good time but don't worry it'll get better... eventually...

I have a playlist for this fic! make sure to check it out [here](#)

anyway I really hope you guys enjoyed this first chapter! please let me know what you thought down in the comments, I don't respond to most but they really make my day! <3 also make sure to subscribe to this, I'll either be posting every day or every other day so keep an eye out for that!

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# **i was a television version of a person**

## Chapter Summary

Things between Wilbur and Tommy get worse, but then... maybe they get better?

## Chapter Notes

hello hello I am back with more of this!

ty all so much for the love you gave me on the first chapter, really glad you're liking this so far it's really my baby of a fic <3

TWs for this chapter: talk about alcohol, talk of anxiety, mention of insomnia

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next morning, Wilbur stumbled out into the kitchen with more than a fair amount of reluctance, his eyes still bleary with sleep. If he didn't feel like he was going to die without coffee, he wouldn't have come out at all. But alas, his caffeine addiction won out in the end, so he was forced to endure the company of his father and brother again even after the fiasco of dinner the night before.

"How'd you sleep?" Phil asked, already grabbing a mug out of the cabinet for him.

"Slept alright," Wilbur murmured, the grogginess from his sleeping pills still clinging to his skin like he was coated in sticky honey.

Phil hummed quietly at this, pouring coffee into the mug and adding in one spoonful of sugar just how he knew Wilbur liked it. Then, he set it down in front of Wilbur, and Wilbur muttered a thanks as he started to blow on the top of the mug to cool it down.

Techno was sitting across from him, sipping at his own coffee as his eyes skimmed over the pages of some book that was probably written in Ancient Greek. He hadn't said anything to acknowledge Wilbur's presence at the table, and Wilbur wasn't sure if that was a relief or not.

When they were younger, grudges like this never lasted very long. It wasn't unusual for one of them to go to sleep angry, but by the time morning rolled around, things had almost always reset to business as usual.

But Wilbur had forgotten how to talk to his brother a long time ago. Somewhere between watching Techno and Phil spend hours together in Phil's office going over some Ancient

Greek text to try and translate it together, and sitting at the dinner table while the two spoke of whatever drama was going on in the classics department, Wilbur had realized he was going to be an outsider in his own family. He was there, but he wasn't. Not really.

Techno had never been good at talking. So once Wilbur had stopped trying on his end, the bridge between them crumpled. Wilbur never saw much of a point in trying to fix it either.

So the table was silent. Wilbur sipped at his coffee, wincing when it burned his tongue. Techno's fingers ran over the pages of his book, the soft brushing of the pages broken up only by the clinking of pots and pans in the kitchen. It was almost calming in the tranquil morning air.

*Almost.* It was more suffocating than anything else.

Soon enough, the smothering silence was broken by Phil setting a plate down in front of Wilbur. Eggs and toast. Something simple. Phil then set the same plate down in front of Techno, before taking his own seat at the table as well.

Both boys muttered their thanks, but neither looked up. Wilbur shoveled a forkful of eggs into his mouth, blinking when he realized they tasted like nothing. He was chewing on rubbery air and nothing else.

Finally, when Phil sat down with his own plate, he decided to break the silence.

"So Techno, did you hear about that huge translation error Bad found the other day?"

Wilbur wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed that Phil's only topic of conversation was something he couldn't even try to participate in. On the one hand, it got him out of having to try and talk. On the other hand, it was just a reminder of how he didn't belong here. Not at this table. Not in this house. Not with this family.

It wasn't like he could exactly blame Phil. Things had shattered between them long ago, and any attempts at piecing it back together would lead to glass cutting open all their palms. It wasn't worth the pain and blood. Not really.

The rest of breakfast passed in a haze of only half-listening to Phil and Techno's conversation, and shoving the tasteless eggs into his mouth as quickly as he could so he could get out of there.

Wilbur didn't bother saying goodbye to Phil and Techno when they both left for the university. With the house to himself, Wilbur forced himself to take a shower before he laid on his bed, staring at the ceiling and trying not to think about how horrible his shift was going to be. (Spoiler alert: it was the only thing circling through his head.)

By the time he walked into the bookshop for a second time, Wilbur was already feeling pretty damn miserable about his day. Puffy greeted him with a warm smile, while Tommy barely acknowledged his existence. Wilbur wasn't sure whether to be pissed or feel guilty about that, so he decided the best course of action was just to ignore Tommy in return.

Thankfully, Puffy took mercy on both of them and ended up leaving Tommy on the register while she took Wilbur to the backroom. She showed him how to organize the inventory shelves, before squeezing his shoulder and telling him to come back into the main store when he was finished.

The task wasn't difficult, but it wasn't completely mindless either. Wilbur was grateful for the opportunity to just focus on the simple task, and buried himself in the work in the vain hope it would make the hours pass faster.

Once he was finished, he was only halfway through his shift. Puffy put him back on the floor to help customers, with Tommy sticking to the cash register. It was quieter in the store than it had been the day before, but Wilbur did what he could, and tried not to flinch every time a customer asked him where they could find a book he'd never heard of before.

Clementine certainly helped. Whenever Wilbur wasn't talking to a customer, she would wind between his legs, and he had to fight the urge to pick her up and cradle her to his chest so many times. She was such a sweet cat, and running his fingers through her fur helped soothe the buzz of anxiety in his chest.

It wasn't long before Puffy told him she was leaving early, and that he and Tommy would be in charge of closing. The day before, Puffy had taught him the closing procedure, which apparently meant she thought the two of them could handle it on their own.

Wilbur was already dreading the idea of being alone on shift with Tommy. But now that he knew why Puffy had hired him, the last thing he wanted was for her to keep him around because of his 'situation', so he was trying a lot harder to be a good employee than he had been the day before. So he didn't complain, and instead just gave Puffy a painfully fake smile as he reassured her they'd be fine.

Tommy barely reacted to the news. He just kept his eyes on the book in his hand, because apparently if no one was actively buying something, register duty meant you could just read until a customer came over.

Late afternoon sunlight spilled through the windows and spread across the floor like liquid gold. The smell of vanilla candle wax was heavy in the air, intermingling with the dust hidden between the pages of the older books to create a kind of scent that settled over your shoulders like a warm blanket. Comforting, and almost nostalgic in a way.

As Wilbur wandered between the shelves in an attempt to memorize the layout, he thought to himself that it was no wonder this place was so popular with students. If he came here as a customer, he'd probably love this place. Just rows and rows of books. A place where he could disappear into a corner and read for hours.

He skimmed past the shelf for all the university classes. Didn't need to be reminded of his father's syllabus, no thanks. He eyed some young adult novels, moving onto the titles in the adult section. There were some books he'd read in high school—classics like *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*.

Continuing to eyeball them, a familiar title caught his eye, and bile rose up in his throat.

## *On Liberty.*

It was just an essay on the ideas of authority and liberty, and while it hadn't been the worst book Wilbur had read, it had still been dry as hell to get through. Which, admittedly, was how he described most of what he had to read for his classes—things to push through, but not necessarily to enjoy.

Still, even though that book hadn't been anywhere near the worst of what he'd had to read, just the sight of it was enough to make his throat go dry. Staring at the title on the spine, Wilbur could only think of the all nighter he'd spent pouring over that essay, trying to write a response well into the early hours of the morning, hopped up on enough caffeine that he didn't stop hearing his heartbeat for the rest of the day.

He'd had a panic attack when dawn rose. It was a distinct memory in his mind, sitting on the floor of his dorm room, hiding his face in his hands as he struggled to breathe because *the words just weren't making sense anymore.*

Bathed in the golden light of the morning sun, Wilbur had shoved his face into a pillow to muffle his cries so anyone outside his room wouldn't be able to hear him. It had been one of the worst panic attacks he'd had in years, and it took nearly half an hour for him to calm down.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the memory, Wilbur forced himself to walk away from the bookshelf on wooden legs. He didn't think about where he was going, and cursed internally to himself the minute he realized he'd accidentally wandered back over to the register.

Tommy glared at Wilbur's arrival, and Wilbur met his glare head on. He knew he should probably apologize to Tommy, but Wilbur was stubborn. Plus, he wasn't exactly that sympathetic to Tommy, considering he practically begged Puffy to fire him the day before.

So he didn't apologize. He stared Tommy down, waiting for the kid to break before he did.

Sure enough, after nearly a full minute of suffocating silence, Tommy spoke.

"The fuck you staring at?" He asked, narrowing his eyes at Wilbur.

"You looked at me first," Wilbur said, folding his arms over his chest.

"Wh- No I didn't! You looked at me first!"

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"I walked over here and you immediately snapped your head up to look at me—"

"Only because you walking all over the place is fucking distracting—"

"Oh, so you admit you looked at me first?"

Tommy fell into silence at that. Wilbur almost grinned at having stopped him short, but there was at least some small part of him that was aware of how childish this entire argument was, and knew it would only be more pathetic if he actually felt triumphant about something like that.

“Can you go back to wandering around like a lost old man? I’m trying to read,” Tommy asked, pointing to the book in his lap for emphasis.

“What will you do if I don’t?” Wilbur asked, something lighting up inside of him seeing how easy it was to annoy this kid.

Tommy frowned. “Seriously, fuck off. I don’t want to talk to you.”

Wilbur smirked. “I have no idea how you have a job working retail. You’re one of the most unpleasant people I’ve ever spoken to.”

“I’m only unpleasant to people I don’t like. Like you,” Tommy said, giving him a pointed look.

Leaning his elbows against the counter, Wilbur’s smirk sharpened. “I thought Puffy told you to give me a chance?”

Immediately, Tommy’s eyes widened, and Wilbur stiffened as he remembered neither Tommy or Puffy knew he’d heard that conversation.

“You were eavesdropping?” Tommy asked, snapping his book shut.

Shit. Well, Wilbur had to go with it, now didn’t he?

“Considering the conversation was you trying to convince Puffy to fire me, I think it wasn’t too out there of me to want to listen in,” Wilbur shot back, the smirk having dropped from his face.

There was a beat as Tommy met his eyes, looking like he couldn’t decide if he was embarrassed or pissed that Wilbur heard what he said to Puffy. Wilbur waited, wondering if Tommy was going to apologize, or if he was going to just double down on what he said. If Wilbur had to place bets, he’d say it was going to be the latter.

It ended up being neither of those options though. All of the sudden, Tommy’s face lit up with some kind of realization, and Wilbur had a feeling he didn’t want to hear what Tommy said next.

“If you heard what we said, then you know what Puffy told me about you,” Tommy said, giving Wilbur a sticky sweet smile that was more akin to him baring his teeth.

Wilbur’s face must’ve reflected the way his heart skipped a beat at that, because Tommy’s grin widened now that he’d found a thread to pull.

“So?” Wilbur asked, struggling to act like he didn’t care about that part of the conversation.

“So, I want to know what’s wrong with you.”

*What’s wrong with you?*

The thread tugged right in the center of his chest, and Wilbur wondered if this was what it was like to unravel. There was nothing *wrong* with him. He had a bad moment with some vodka, and that was it. But Tommy thought there was something wrong with him. The same as Phil, Techno, and Puffy. They all thought he was broken, and now Tommy probably did too.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Wilbur told him, having to force the words out through his rapidly closing throat.

“Really? Because according to Puffy, you got some issues, man.”

Wilbur clenched his jaw, trying to ignore the way sweat was beading on the back of his neck. “My dad’s just overreacting to some stupid shit I did. It’s not a big deal.”

“What did you do?” Tommy asked, leaning far over the counter now. “Did you get in a fight? Get arrested?”

“No, that’s not what happened,” Wilbur snapped, curling his hands in and out of fists. “It’s none of your business, got it?”

And before Tommy could continue pressing, Wilbur stormed away, his heart pounding in his ears. He ignored the feeling of Tommy’s stare boring into the back of his head, and slid between two bookshelves, completely out of sight from the register.

Much to Wilbur’s relief, Tommy didn’t try to talk to him for the rest of the shift.



You could get used to anything after a while, and that was the case with Wilbur and his job.

He didn’t enjoy it. It was tiring, mind-numbing, and no matter how many times he did it, he still couldn’t get over the anxiety that would twist in his gut anytime he had to approach a customer. But he got used to it.

Over the next two weeks, Wilbur memorized the entire layout of the bookstore. He learned where to find which books, kept up with new releases so he could recommend things appropriately to customers, and got faster at organizing the inventory in the back. Despite how little he wanted to work there, he wasn’t going to be a pity case, so he made sure to put the proper amount of effort into his job.

What he didn’t put effort into was fixing things with Tommy. After the fight on his second day, Wilbur decided it wasn’t worth trying to argue with him. When Tommy realized he wasn’t going to get anger like that out of Wilbur again, he gave up on his attempts to push his buttons, and the two fell into a stony kind of truce.

They weren't friendly. It was a kind of stiff and cold neutrality that existed between them. There was no open hostility—it was mostly just nothing at all. Even when Puffy left them alone in the shop for longer and longer periods of time, neither one of them would try to make conversation with the other.

Wilbur wasn't necessarily angry at Tommy. Technically, Wilbur had started this feud, and Tommy had reacted. Now they weren't at each other's throats, but they weren't on good terms.

It was fine. Like the work, Wilbur got used to it. Got used to the suffocating silences, the clipped sentences when Tommy had to ask Wilbur to grab something for him. It wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't terrible.

In the second week, there was the tiniest shift to something slightly more on the positive side of neutral between them. Tommy cut open his hand trying to use a box cutter to open up a new delivery of books, and while Wilbur could've been mean about it, he decided against it. Instead, he just offered to help Tommy bandage it up, and surprisingly, Tommy agreed.

"There, should be all good now," Wilbur said as he finished taping the bandage around the back of Tommy's palm.

Tommy flexed his fingers, wincing at how stiff his hand was. "Thanks," he muttered, not looking at Wilbur. "I should probably get back to unloading the boxes now."

Unloading boxes with a huge gash on his hand? That was going to hurt.

"Nah, you go work the floor. I'll do it," Wilbur told him.

Glancing over his shoulder, Tommy frowned at him. "I'm fine. I can do it."

"I'm sure you can, but it'll be annoying as hell," Wilbur shrugged. "I've been working inventory organization for the past week, so I know where to put it all."

Tommy blinked a few times. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

For a moment, Tommy looked like he wanted to say something to Wilbur. But after a few seconds ticked by, he decided against it.

"Alright," he said. Then, he left the backroom, the door clicking shut loudly behind him.

Wilbur wasn't sure why he offered to unload for him. It was the harder job compared to just talking to customers, especially considering they were pretty dead at this time of the day. He just.... did.

There was no major shift in their relationship after that incident, but their silences felt a little less suffocating, and Wilbur figured that was as close to a win as he'd get with Tommy.



Wilbur wouldn't say he was doing well. He still struggled to sleep, he still couldn't figure out how to talk to Techno or Phil, and he still spent most of his free time staring listlessly at his ceiling. His therapist said he was just getting used to the routine. Wilbur wondered how long he was supposed to wait for the routine to actually make him feel better.

By the end of the second week, Wilbur still didn't have an answer to when he was supposed to start feeling better. In fact, he had even less of an answer than before, because he had a bad day.

It was his day off. From the moment he woke up, he could tell something was off, and he wasn't sure what it was.

In a way, Wilbur felt like he'd woken up after having been grated against a cheese grater in his sleep. The air felt too sharp against his raw skin, every little noise was like nails on a chalkboard against his ears, and when Phil and Techno tried to talk to him over breakfast, he ended up snapping at both of them before storming off to his room.

Irritation bubbled inside of him like a pot that was ready to overflow. It was strange, because as far as he knew, nothing set this off. There'd been no argument between him, Phil, and Techno the night before. He hadn't exchanged any sharp words with Tommy during his shift. It had been an entirely normal day.

His thoughts were too loud. They crowded around his head, reminding him of all the things he was missing back at college. Niki was the only one of his friends who he'd actually told what was going on. He'd gotten some texts from others—Fundy, Jack, Eret, Quackity—but he hadn't bothered to respond to any of them. What was he supposed to say? He'd had a stupid accident with vodka so his dad had pulled him out of his classes? No, that was fucking embarrassing.

God, he was probably missing so much in his classes. All that time spent studying, and now he wasn't even going to be able to take his fucking finals. The sleepless nights, the back aches from sitting hunched over his desk, the borderline dangerous amounts of caffeine he'd consumed—it was pointless in the end. He'd have to retake all of that when he got back, and he was already dreading going through that slog a second time.

It wasn't doing him any good to let his thoughts circle around the things he couldn't do anything about, but he couldn't get his brain to shut up. He spent the entire day buried under his blankets, trying to hide from everything. But he couldn't hide from his mind.

When dinnertime came, Wilbur forced himself to eat at the table with Phil and Techno. Phil tried asking him if he was alright, but Wilbur knew if he tried to talk to Phil, he'd just end up screaming at the man. So he held his tongue, and Phil took the hint to back off.

Wilbur did everything he could to try and distract himself. As soon as it was a decent time to sleep, Wilbur took his sleeping pills, waiting for them to kick him and send him into a day less shitty than this one.

But the universe apparently hated him, because he could hear his heart racing in his ears as he waited for a calm that never came. This had happened before. When his anxiety was so loud,

not even his sleeping pills could calm him down. It was rare, but it happened, and those were often his worst nights.

He tried to sleep. He really did. But the moon got higher in the sky, and Wilbur was tossing and turning nonstop. His limbs buzzed with unused energy, and Wilbur knew there was only one thing that would calm him down.

There was no alcohol in the house. Techno had poured it all down the sink the day before Wilbur was released from the hospital.

But Wilbur had the keys to his car. And he knew there was a twenty-four hour liquor store not too far from the bookstore.

Wilbur knew it was a bad idea. But he needed *something* to get his head to shut up. Something to drown out the screaming in his mind, to force him down and send him spiraling into drunk oblivion. Everything was just too much, and when things had been too much for him before, vodka had always been just what he needed.

One minute, Wilbur was laying in his bed, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling as he mapped out the route to the liquor store in his mind. The next minute, he was sitting in his car, with the engine rumbling beneath his seat.

His crowded thoughts screamed and cawed at him like a flock of crows as he drove down the empty roads to the liquor store. This late at night, there were hardly any other cars out, with every stoplight turning green the second he pulled up to the white line. He gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles, his heart pumping a steady staccato in his ears that only got louder the closer he got.

Wilbur knew he shouldn't do this. It- It had just been an accident. But he could make that mistake again. He hadn't touched any alcohol since that night, and despite his craving for the burn in the back of his throat and the heady buzz weighing down his limbs, he was still second-guessing himself as the liquor store came into view.

There was street parking right in front of it. Wilbur pulled to a stop, cutting the engine and blinking as he stared at the neon red sign, reminding him that this was a twenty-four hour store. It was open. The streets were dark and empty, but this place was open and filled with just about any kind of shitty vodka he wanted. He was only a few steps from the door. In less than a minute he could be inside.

The crows in his mind squawked in protest. This was a bad idea. That was a logical fact. But did he care?

Wilbur wasn't sure. And the fact that he couldn't bring himself to be worried about what he might do once he took that first shot—and he knew there would be more than one once he got started—that was the most concerning part of this whole thing.

But he couldn't sleep. He couldn't fucking sleep and if he was trapped with the birds cawing his insecurities and anxieties in his mind for the next eight hours, he was going to go insane.

There was a flash of movement in the distance. Wilbur's eyes flickered past the liquor store, and he noticed a young couple stumbling out of an old diner that Wilbur had driven by a few times before. It was nothing special, the building sagging with age and the windows stained from years of grime, but he latched onto it anyway.

Wilbur had barely touched his dinner. He hadn't been hungry at the time, and he still wasn't really, but drinking on an empty stomach was never a good idea. If he was going to do this, he might as well get something to eat first.

Plus, it would be a way to kill more time. It wasn't like he had anywhere to be right now anyway.

Carefully avoiding the gaze of the neon liquor store sign, Wilbur locked his car as he hurried towards the diner. It was also a twenty-four hour diner, and Wilbur could see why the liquor store and this place were right next to each other. College students and the like would go to the liquor store for their booze, taking note of the homey diner right next door. Later on when that booze was settling heavily in their stomachs, they would drag their drunk bodies back to the diner, the drunk mind always finding solace in greasy, salty diner food. The drunkards would have a good night, and would be more likely to go back to the liquor store with the diner next door.

In a way, it was like mutualism. Boosting business for both the liquor store and the diner, with the customers winning on both sides in the end.

The door to the diner squeaked as Wilbur pulled it open. Harsh fluorescent lights buzzed above his head, and the smell of greasy burgers and sweet pancakes wafted through the air. Dingy black and white tile floors stretched from wall to wall, and Wilbur heard the familiar clang of pots and pans coming from the kitchen behind the counter.

A waitress in a blue uniform noticed him enter, and she waved her hand flippantly towards the booths. The place was empty, so he could sit wherever.

Wilbur chose a booth at random, the faded blue leather cracking under his weight. He rested his elbows on the table, picking at a hangnail on his thumb, when the waitress came over to drop a menu in front of him.

"Can I get you something to drink?" She asked. There was no greeting, no customer service smile. It was midnight, and neither of them were going to pretend like Wilbur was looking for a five star dining experience.

"Just water for now," Wilbur said. The waitress nodded and turned away, her red kitten heels clicking against the tile floor. Picking up the menu, Wilbur ran his fingers over the laminated pictures of classic diner meals, flipping it over to see what he could stomach right now.

Except-

He hadn't even gotten halfway down the page when he realized someone was staring at him. There was a prickling on his skin, his instincts hemming and hawing as they recognized a

possible threat. There was no threat in a diner, but Wilbur's curiosity was piqued, so he glanced up from the menu to try and see who was watching him.

Two booths down, Wilbur found himself staring right into a familiar pair of bright blue eyes.

Fuck. Of all fucking times to run into the coworker he was on neutral, if not passive aggressive terms with, it had to be tonight.

Wilbur and Tommy stared at each other down from across the diner, neither one reacting, but neither one breaking eye contact either. For Wilbur, he knew he didn't look good. He probably had bags under his eyes, his hair was definitely a mess, and he'd only thrown a coat over his pajamas when he left the house.

While normally that would embarrass him, Tommy didn't really seem that much better off. His blonde curls hung low on his face, unusually flat compared to how bouncy his hair always seemed to be. He had similar dark circles sticking out from his pale face, and while he wasn't wearing pajamas, his sweatshirt was wrinkled like he'd slept in it.

What the hell was Tommy doing in a random diner at midnight? Wilbur at least had the excuse of wanting to go drink but needing to eat beforehand. Tommy was a kid. It wasn't even that safe for him to be out in the city at night, and Wilbur knew Tommy didn't drive a car because Puffy had offered him rides home from work before (which he always refused).

The crows squawked in his head again, telling him to go over and ask Tommy why he was there. But it wasn't like Wilbur could just *do* that. He wasn't friends with Tommy. They weren't exactly enemies, but they were closer to that than they were to anything friendly.

They continued their staring contest. It wasn't until the waitress appeared at his table to set his water down in front of him did they break their eye contact.

"Do you know what you want?" The waitress asked, acrylic red nails tapping against the side of her notepad.

Wilbur hadn't gotten a very good look at the menu before he'd noticed Tommy. But he pointed at a random eggs and hash brown plate he'd noticed during his brief perusal, and the waitress hummed. How did he want his eggs? Over easy. What meat did he want? Bacon was fine. Did he want coffee? No thanks.

Her heels *clicked clicked clicked* as she walked away again, and as soon as she was out of view, Wilbur found Tommy still staring at him. His brows were furrowed, like he wasn't sure if Wilbur was actually there. Like he was some kind of desert mirage.

Wilbur had no idea what to do. Did he just ignore Tommy? What was the procedure for running into the coworker you barely knew at a shitty diner when you were suffering from an anxiety-induced bout of insomnia at midnight?

In the end, Wilbur's indecisiveness was rewarded when Tommy made the decision for the both of them.

With a loud huff, he got up from his table, taking his own half-empty cup of water with him. Then, he didn't say anything as he slid into the seat across from Wilbur, setting his cup back down right next to Wilbur's.

"I don't know about you, but I wasn't gonna be able to focus on my food if we were just sat there staring at each other the whole fuckin' time," Tommy said in lieu of a proper greeting, folding his hands on the table in front of him.

Wilbur blinked. "Me neither," he admitted, the words being the first thing he'd said all day that wasn't lined with sharp irritation. He was too confused by this whole situation to be irritated.

A beat of silence passed.

"So," Tommy started when he realized Wilbur wasn't going to say anything else, "hang out in shitty diners at midnight a lot?"

For some reason, despite his brash voice, Tommy didn't actually sound all that annoyed with Wilbur. Not like when they usually spoke. Maybe it was the exhaustion underlying his voice, the words falling flat to the table like there was some kind of gravity pulling them down. The same gravity that was tugging the skin underneath Tommy's eyes down, creating the dark circles that Wilbur knew matched his own. Or maybe it was just that Tommy was also too confused by this situation to be irritated. That would make sense as well.

Either way, Wilbur had been irritated all day, and he was tired of it. He was tired of the anger prickling over his arms like a second skin. He was tired of the sharp edges to his words. This was a welcome distraction from his crowded thoughts, and he was going to dive headfirst into it.

"Not usually, but tonight's a bit of an exception," Wilbur huffed, wrapping his fingers around his water cup.

"Why?" Tommy asked, raising an eyebrow.

Wilbur shrugged, fingers already twitching for a cigarette. "Couldn't sleep."

And for some reason, Tommy furrowed brows smoothed out at that. He blinked a few times, sharp eyes flickering over Wilbur's face and clothes, before letting out a sigh.

"Me fucking too," he muttered, dragging a hand down his face.

"You can't sleep?" Wilbur asked, raising an eyebrow. He wouldn't have guessed Tommy to be the type of person to struggle with sleep. When he was a teenager, he remembered finding it all too easy to let darkness swallow him like an old friend. It was a welcome respite from the trials and tribulations of adolescence, something his exhausted, growing body was always eager to pull him into, even when he had things he needed to stay awake for. He would've imagined Tommy was the same way.

"Nope," Tommy said, popping the 'p' loudly. "Insomnia's a bitch sometimes."

“God, isn’t that the fucking truth,” Wilbur grumbled, glancing down at his water and watching the way the tapping of his fingers cast ripples across the surface. “Have you dealt with it for a while?”

“It’s been a few years,” Tommy said, dropping his hands into his lap. “You?”

“Same. Started in my first year of college,” Wilbur told him. “I have sleeping pills that my doctor prescribed me, and usually they knock me out no problem, but sometimes I’m just too fucking anxious for sedatives to even work on me.”

Tommy snorted, and while the sound wasn’t angry, it wasn’t friendly either. It was something bitter, like jealousy. “Wish I could get sleeping pills. I just gotta deal with it on my own.”

Once again, Wilbur was reminded of how Tommy had gotten angry with him for not wanting to work at the bookstore. Because while Wilbur didn’t need the money, Tommy apparently did. That must’ve been related to why he couldn’t get sleeping pills.

“Is it every night?” Wilbur asked.

“Nah, I’d go fucking nuts if it was every night. It’s not even a weekly thing. It’s usually only once or twice a month. Even if I’m exhausted, I just feel restless,” Tommy shrugged, grabbing his water and taking a sip.

“Like your thoughts are too loud, or like there’s electricity running through your blood making you wanna jump up and run around?”

There was a pause as Tommy’s eyes went wide, staring at Wilbur in obvious surprise. He considered the question for a moment, running his finger along the rim of his cup.

“Um, it depends. Usually it’s the electricity thing, but lately it’s been more of the thoughts being too loud one,” Tommy admitted, his voice much softer than before.

Wilbur tried to give him a sympathetic smile. “That’s mine. Everything in my head is just going too fast and it’s all so loud even if I’m in dead silence. Like there’s a TV station in my brain I just can’t turn off.”

Another silence hung over them as Tommy considered him for a moment. He opened his mouth to say something, but then there was movement in the corner of Wilbur’s eye as the waitress came back.

“You moved over here, kid?” The waitress asked, setting down a small plate of pancakes in front of Tommy.

“Uh, yeah. Is that alright? I know him so-”

“I don’t care. Still paying separately?” The waitress raised a thin, dark eyebrow, and Tommy nodded. She then turned to Wilbur. “Your food will be out in a few minutes.”

With that, she turned and left again. Wilbur eyed the small stack of plain pancakes that sat in front of Tommy, the steam curling up and around Tommy’s face like smoke.

Tommy picked up his fork to start eating, but glanced at the empty spot in front of Wilbur and paused. Then, he set the fork back down.

“You can eat. I don’t mind,” Wilbur told him.

“Eh, feels a little weird,” Tommy shrugged.

Wilbur almost laughed. Despite Tommy’s biting remarks and his unrelenting scowls, he was still polite enough to wait for Wilbur to get his food before he started eating. It was almost endearing to see this small glimpse into the kid that sat behind all the brash bravado Tommy liked to put up.

Endearing? Fuck, Wilbur must’ve been more tired than he thought if he was thinking that *Tommy* of all people was endearing.

“What’s on the TV station?” Tommy suddenly asked, startling Wilbur to attention again.

Frowning, Wilbur straightened up. “Huh?”

“You said when you can’t sleep, it’s like there’s a TV station in your brain you can’t turn off. What’s it playing?”

Oh.

A part of Wilbur was confused as to why Tommy wanted to know what his anxious thoughts were. It wasn’t like he could actually care about what was going on with Wilbur. Again, it wasn’t like they were friends.

But there was this strange back and forth the two had engaged in since Tommy sat down. It didn’t carry the stifling neutrality that had been glossed over all their interactions since that second day at the bookstore.

It had to be the exhaustion, and the inclination to commiserate over problems with someone who understood what you were going through. Misery loved company, and right now it seemed like he and Tommy were wading through very similar types of misery.

Tonight, Tommy wasn’t the coworker who tried to get Wilbur fired on his first day, and Wilbur wasn’t the stuck up guy who was complaining to Tommy about being handed a job. They were just... acquaintances.

Plus, there was a certain honesty that came easier in situations like this. Unfamiliar places late at night, with people that were closer to strangers than friends.

“Just... shit about school,” Wilbur admitted, picking at the hangnail again.

“How the hell are you taking classes if you work at the bookstore every day?” Tommy asked, frowning at him.

The waitress then decided to make her return, setting the plate of eggs, hash browns, and bacon right in front of Wilbur. He muttered a thanks to her as she left again, still looking at

his hands and wincing when he tugged a bit too hard on the hangnail.

“I’m not,” Wilbur told him, the smell of rubbery eggs curling around his face. “I’m supposed to be. But I had to drop my classes a few weeks back.” A thin sliver of blood curled around his fingertip from the hangnail. He wiped it off on his pants before he grabbed his silverware.

“Why?” Tommy had picked up his fork again, clearly figuring that since Wilbur had his food, it was alright for him to dig in now.

“Just, uh, personal shit,” Wilbur deflected, stabbing into the hash browns with his fork. “But yeah, I’m pretty stressed about not being able to finish my classes. I was supposed to graduate this year, but I don’t think I can now.”

“I mean-” Tommy stuffed a forkful of pancake into his mouth, “it’s not that unusual to take a bit to finish your degree. Puffy said she had to take a few years off when she was in college before she finished.”

Wilbur sighed. Tommy didn’t understand. It wasn’t that it was something he couldn’t do. Hell, he’d taken a year off his degree already. But it was more than that. Phil thought that Wilbur wasn’t strong enough to push through his classes. It was a personal failure that Wilbur wasn’t sure he could deal with.

“It’s just fucking embarrassing,” Wilbur whispered, fried potatoes crunching between his teeth. He paused to chew, and he could tell Tommy wanted to push the issue, so he swallowed before Tommy could finish his own bite. “What about you? What’s on your TV station?”

Tommy scowled, and Wilbur returned his stare evenly. If Tommy got to ask him, he could hit the question right back across the tennis court that was their table.

After a few moments, Tommy dropped his shoulders. “Money, bills, the normal stuff people stress about.”

Wilbur frowned. “So you have to help your parents pay the bills?”

For some reason, this made Tommy snort. “Not quite.” Wilbur waited for him to continue. To explain what Wilbur was getting wrong.

After a few moments ticked by though, it became clear Tommy wasn’t going to say anything else. Wilbur silently looked back down at his food, piercing the top of the eggs and watching the golden yolk spread out across the plate.

For the first time since Tommy sat down across from him, the silence turned awkward. Their forks clinked against their plates, and Wilbur could hear the crows already picking up their caws in the back of his mind.

There was something he needed to say to Tommy. Wilbur was just putting it off at this point.

“Do you wanna just stop this bullshit?” Wilbur asked, staring intently at his eggs.



Tommy made a questioning noise in the back of his throat. “Huh?”

“The whole pissed off thing we got going on at work. The fact that we don’t talk to each other unless we absolutely have to. I don’t know about you, but I’d like to at least be able to make conversation during shifts so I’m not bored out of my mind all the time,” Wilbur offered, pushing his hash browns into the sticky pool of egg yolk.

There was a moment as Tommy frowned at his pancakes. He had paused his eating, and Wilbur noticed that his free hand was twitching the tiniest bit.

“I only got pissed at you because you were being a stuck up asshole,” Tommy finally said after a moment.

“I know. And then you tried to get me fired,” Wilbur shot back. He wasn’t going to apologize. But he wasn’t going to deny it either.

Tommy snorted. “Fair point. That was a dick move on my end.”

The same as him, Tommy didn’t offer an apology. The recognition of fault was good enough for both ends.

Wilbur took a bite of his hash browns. The golden yolk was sticky, savory, and almost plastic-like as it coated the burnt potatoes.

“Okay.” Tommy put down his fork, and looked up to meet Wilbur’s eyes. “I’m fine with calling it square.”

Something like excitement curled in Wilbur’s chest at this, and he wasn’t sure what the feeling meant. Tommy was a lot more like him than he had first thought, and this sense of a kindred spirit lifted a kind of weight off his shoulders he hadn’t even really acknowledged was there in the first place.

They ate the rest of their meal between scattered bits of pointless conversation. Tommy talked about his favorite books to read while on shift (unsurprisingly, he liked young adult novels, but he was currently reading *The Martian* and had nothing but praise for it). Wilbur talked about how he hadn’t read a book for fun in years, and Tommy promised to give him some recommendations at work the next day.

The waitress came back over, sliding two separate receipt trays their way. Wilbur placed his card on top, while Tommy took out a crumpled wad of bills and sorted out the proper amount before handing it back to the waitress. The waitress’s face pinched at the messy dollars, but she took it without comment, and came back with a handful of change for Tommy and a customer’s copy receipt for Wilbur.

A few minutes later, they were standing outside the diner, walking towards Wilbur’s car. He was still parked right in front of the liquor store, and bile rose in his throat the longer he stared at the neon sign that had been so alluring less than an hour before.

He hadn't noticed it during the meal, but the crows had quieted now. His thoughts were no longer racing, and the raw feeling on his skin was gone completely.

They got to his car. He stared at the liquor store sign.

"You're not a wrong'en who drinks and drives, are you?" Tommy asked, raising a challenging eyebrow at him.

No. Wilbur had been planning on waiting till he got back to his room to start the drinking.

But with Tommy's careful gaze watching him, and with the greasy diner food sitting heavily in his stomach, Wilbur realized... he didn't want to drink anymore. He was pretty sure he'd be able to sleep without it when he got back to his bed.

"Of course not. It was just easy parking," Wilbur said, unlocking his car and opening the driver's seat. Then, he paused, and looked back up at Tommy. "Let me give you a ride home."

Tommy frowned. "I walked over here, I can walk back perfectly fine."

"It's one in the morning. Even if you think you're fine, walking down these streets isn't something even I'd do on my own," Wilbur told him, gripping his keys in his hand. "If not for yourself, can you just let me drive you for my own peace of mind?"

Faltering, Tommy seemed to consider that. He glanced down the street, and then back to Wilbur, shifting from foot to foot.

Then, he sighed. "Fine." He opened the passenger door and climbed in, while Wilbur threw himself into the driver's seat.

As he started up the car and pulled back onto the street, he could see the neon liquor store sign growing smaller and smaller behind them. For some reason, relief washed over him when he couldn't see it anymore. His therapist would probably be proud. Not that he was planning on telling her about this.

Tommy told him which turns to make, and he was right, his place was pretty close to the diner. It was only a few blocks down, and soon Wilbur was slowing the car in front of a dilapidated brick apartment building.

When Tommy opened the door, the smell of cigarettes blew into the car, and it was so pungent it made Wilbur wince even though he was literally a smoker himself. Tommy didn't seem to mind though. He just undid his seatbelt and climbed out.

"Thanks Wil. I appreciate the ride," Tommy said, leaning down to look at him through the car window.

"No problem. I'll see you tomorrow at work."

For the first time all night, Tommy grinned at him. "See you tomorrow."

And with that, Tommy turned and headed towards the apartment doors. Wilbur watched as he took a scanner out of his pocket to let himself in, and threw one last wave over his shoulder at Wilbur before letting the door click shut behind him.

Now knowing that Tommy wasn't going to get mugged on the street, Wilbur drove off. He purposefully took a different route so he didn't pass by the liquor store again, and when he pulled into his driveway, he slumped back in his seat.

This night hadn't gone how he expected it to at all. But he couldn't help but be relieved that this was the outcome he'd ended up with. No stupid mistakes had been made, and it seemed like he might've repaired his relationship with Tommy. Hopefully this meant his shifts would be less mind numbing now, though he'd have to see how Tommy acted around him tomorrow.

When he laid down in his bed again, he found his thoughts were blessedly silent. Within minutes, he drifted off into a deep sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

god that diner scene was so fun to write, there's really nothing like the surreal experience of sitting in a diner at midnight when you can't sleep. it's such a specific vibe so I hope I captured that lol

but yes!! the crimeboys are improving!! wilbur isn't really improving in any other aspect of his life but hey at least he's on better terms with his coworker now

anyway I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! lmk what you thought down in the comments below, I don't respond to most but I read them all and they really make my day <3

I have a spotify playlist for this fic! go check it out [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# and to the bone i'm evergreen

## Chapter Summary

Phil's having people over for dinner and Wilbur isn't happy about it.

## Chapter Notes

hello my darlings I am back with more!

as always thank you so much for all the love you've given this so far, this work is just something very sweet and dear to my heart <3

I don't think there are any more trigger warnings this chapter needs outside of stuff that's already been mentioned before

hope you guys enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Wilbur walked into the bookstore the day after his late night diner experience with Tommy, he was half-expecting Tommy to avoid looking at him, pretending as if the night before had never happened. After he'd woken up that morning, he'd considered for a moment that the whole thing hadn't even happened, and had just been a very strange dream.

But then he'd found the receipt from the diner sitting on his nightstand, and knew it hadn't been a dream at all. This was confirmed a second time when he stepped into the store to start his shift, and Tommy *smiled* at him.

It wasn't a huge smile or anything. But it was friendly, which was a vast improvement compared to the scowls Wilbur had long since grown used to.

"Sup, were you able to get to sleep last night?" Tommy asked as a greeting, running his hand down Clementine's back as he crouched on the floor in front of the register.

And just like that, things had shifted.

After that, while Wilbur still wouldn't say he loved his job, it became leagues more tolerable than it had been before. Puffy left them alone to run the store often now, and when business was slow, he and Tommy would chat.

It was never the same topic. Sometimes it was about the books Tommy read while on shift, sometimes it was about whatever latest book had been released that all the customers were asking about, and sometimes it was about the most random subjects anyone could think of.

Slowly, over the course of the next week, Wilbur got to actually know his coworker for the first time. Tommy liked video games, with *Animal Crossing* being one of his all time favorite series. Once he started, he rambled about the differences between *New Leaf* and *New Horizons* for a solid twenty minutes, explaining why *New Leaf* was the far better game of the two.

Tommy was a funny kid when he wasn't pissed off at Wilbur. He had a loud, crass sense of humor, and the minute he made his first cum joke, Wilbur thanked his lucky stars because he'd thought of so many cum jokes but was never sure if Puffy would get pissed at him for saying them. But if Tommy did it, well, he probably wouldn't get scolded too badly.

Puffy wasn't blind to the change in their dynamic. It wasn't obvious, and she didn't bring it up, but Wilbur noticed her watching the two of them when they bickered about something stupid, both struggling to hold back a smile as they jokingly insulted the other. There was this strange warmth in her eyes as they went at it, and Wilbur wondered if that was part of why she was suddenly leaving them to run the store together a lot more than before.

Wilbur wasn't exactly planning on hanging out with Tommy outside of work again though. It's not like he didn't enjoy talking with the kid at the diner, but Tommy was seventeen, and he was aware that it was a little pathetic for an adult like him to spend his free time with a teenager. Even if Tommy was one of the funniest people he'd ever met. And even if Wilbur was getting tired of spending all his free time just hiding in his room, not wanting to face Phil's sympathetic looks and Techno's confused attempts at trying to reconnect something that had broken long ago.

Well, Wilbur hadn't *planned* on hanging out with Tommy again. Until something unexpected came up.

"Wil?"

There was a harsh knocking on his door, and Wilbur groaned as he shoved his pillow over his head to block out the sound. It was late in the morning, and Wilbur's shift didn't start for a few more hours. There was no reason for him to be awake. There was no reason for Phil to be knocking on his door at this hour.

"What?" Wilbur yelled out, voice muffled by the pillow.

"Can I come in?"

Groaning again, Wilbur threw the pillow off his face. He blinked the sleep out of his eyes, and noticed sunlight casting long streaks of light against his sheets. He probably wasn't going to be able to go back to sleep even if Phil left right now.

"Fine," Wilbur grumbled.

The door opened, and Phil poked his head in with an awkward smile. “You look comfortable,” he commented, taking a few steps into the room but staying close to the doorframe.

“I was sleeping,” Wilbur mumbled, annoyance flashing through him. It was already hard enough for him to fall asleep, and the lingering effects of his sleeping pills still clung to his skin like a thick sludge. This better be something good.

“Sorry about that, mate. You can go back to sleep in a minute,” Phil told him, and Wilbur scoffed because that wasn’t going to happen. “Techno and I were just heading out, but I needed to tell you something before we left.”

“What is it?” Wilbur asked, blinking again as he dragged his hands down his face.

“I wanted to let you know that some of our friends from the department are coming over tonight for dinner,” Phil explained.

Wait, *what*?

Sitting straight up, Wilbur frowned at Phil. “Wh- They’re coming over here?”

Phil nodded, something sheepish flashing over his face. “Uh, yeah. It’s kind of a new tradition the classics department started before you moved back here. Once a month someone in the department hosts a big dinner, and everyone brings their own dishes so it’s like a potluck type thing. It’s a lot of fun, but there’s usually alcohol there, so I wanted to warn you ahead of time.”

This evening, his house would be invaded by all the TAs and professors in the classics department—people he didn’t know, but his brother and father did. They would talk about ancient texts he didn’t know the first thing about, no one would know who he was, and Phil would definitely be keeping an eye on him to make sure he didn’t sneak any wine.

It sounded like hell. Literal hell.

“Do I have to be there?” Wilbur asked, wincing at how much he sounded like a whiny teenager.

Thankfully, Phil shook his head. “No, of course not. If you want, you can just stay in your room and I’ll bring a plate of food up for you.”

Well, at least there was that. Wilbur wasn’t looking forward to being trapped in his room for the entire evening, like he was a thirteen year old with social anxiety who didn’t want to talk to his father’s friends.

In a way, that *was* what he was, wasn’t it? Sure, he wasn’t thirteen, but he was socially anxious, and he definitely didn’t want to talk to his dad’s friends. It was pathetic. He should be able to make conversation with these people.

But the idea of standing in the sea of strangers in his living room, watching Techno and Phil smile and chat about their shared passion, the passion Wilbur could never relate to, the thing

that separated him from the rest of this family like a line drawn in the sand—he wouldn't just be the black sheep. He'd be a pillar. Forced to stand and watch the waves of conversation crash against him without the capability to even pretend to understand what was going on.

And even if he could participate, what kind of conversation would he have? He could already hear the questions the other professors and grad students would ask him. *So what are you studying? When are you graduating? Oh, why are you taking a break?* And then he'd have to lie. To come up with excuses for why he had to take another break, and try to ignore the pity that would flash through their eyes when they realized his poor father had to deal with a disappointment of a son like him.

Yeah, Wilbur didn't want to do that.

"Alright. I'll stay up here," Wilbur said, twisting his fingers in his lap.

Phil nodded, giving him another sheepish smile as he turned to leave. He only got one foot through the door before he paused.

"Is everything going alright?" Phil asked, his smile turning pained. "You haven't talked much about work lately. Is the routine helping?"

Wilbur wasn't sure if it was helping. It was certainly better than sitting in his room being alone with his thoughts though, and he figured that counted for something. "It's not terrible," he shrugged.

"Have things gotten better with that coworker you were having trouble with?"

The question startled Wilbur. He hadn't mentioned Tommy since the night of his first shift, when he'd talked about how he'd pissed Tommy off. He hadn't expected Phil to remember that, especially since it had been well over a month since then, and Phil hadn't asked about it once.

"Uh, yeah, it's better. We worked things out." Wilbur never told Phil and Techno about the diner incident. Neither of them needed to know how close he'd come to slipping that night. It would just remind them he was a ticking time bomb, one they needed to keep an eye on at all times.

"I'm glad," Phil said, lines crinkling at the corners of his eyes.

Wilbur didn't know how to respond to that, so he stayed quiet. Silence weighed down his shoulders, and Phil stared at him for just a beat too long before coughing and moving back to the door.

"I better get to work. I'll see you tonight," Phil said, waving at him as he headed out.

Lifting a hand, Wilbur gave a half-wave before Phil clicked the door shut behind him, knowing full well that Wilbur hated it when people entered his room and didn't close the door when they left.

Groaning, Wilbur fell back against his pillows, twisting his fingers into his hair. Tonight was going to suck. That was a fact.

He tried to go back to sleep. Outside, he heard Phil's car engine start as he and Techno left, and waited for the hand of sleep to drag him into the darkness again. But after only a few minutes laying with his eyes closed, he knew it was going to be pointless because he was far too awake, and figured he might as well get up and take a shower to start his day.

Many hours later, Wilbur found himself weaving through the maze of bookshelves, running his fingers over the smooth spines of paperbacks while letting the scent of Puffy's vanilla candle wrap him in warmth.

It was already close to the end of his shift, and Wilbur was dreading when he'd have to drive home. He was sure the party was in full swing by now, and even if he was going to go straight up to his room, he still needed to traverse the living room to get to the stairs. That would mean he was going to run into at least one person who would want to talk to him, and he'd have to stutter out some excuse for why he needed to get to his room, and apologize for why he couldn't join the dinner party in a way that didn't make him look like a sulking teenager.

He was already having anxiety over the anxiety that would cause him. That was the worst part of anxiety. More than half the time, you weren't even experiencing anxiety over something that mattered, but you were anxious about feeling anxious. It was a horrible cycle, and the fact that Wilbur could already feel a pit forming in his stomach told him the loop had already opened up.

Making his way to the front of the store, Wilbur found Tommy sitting behind the register as always, nose buried in a printer-fresh copy of *The Hunger Games*. The sight distracted Wilbur from the dread wrapping around him like a vice for just a moment, because he remembered being Tommy's age and reading *The Hunger Games* for the first time. How it just sucked him in, his eyes skimming the page as fast as possible with his breath caught in his throat as he waited to see what happened to Katniss next.

Recently he'd been debating rereading the book, just for his own amusement. It had been quite a few years since he first read it, and it wasn't like he had much to do in the evenings except go on his laptop and watch random Youtube videos.

"Enjoying that?" Wilbur asked as he approached the counter.

Tommy glanced up from the page, face immediately brightening at the question. "Fuck yeah I am! This book is awesome!"

Wilbur couldn't help but smile at Tommy's obvious excitement over the book. "Who's your favorite character?"

"Uh, Katniss, obviously? She's so fucking cool, man," Tommy said, sliding a bookmark between the pages and flipping it shut. "This Peeta guy is a little lame though."

"Why do you think he's lame?" Wilbur asked, raising an eyebrow.



“He just- he seems like a wrong’en, y’know? Confessin’ that he likes Katniss at the interview and shit in front of all those millions of people on the TV. That’s not a very pogchamp move if you ask me,” Tommy huffed, slumping back in his chair.

“I mean, to be fair, the crush confession was a strategic move to help Katniss get more sponsors,” Wilbur pointed out.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Could’ve warned her or something.”

Rolling his eyes, Wilbur bent down so his elbows were resting on the counter. There was a meow to his right, and he gasped in delight as Clementine hopped up, reaching over to scratch her ears and grinning when she pressed her head into his palm.

Wilbur might’ve been in a shit mood because he knew that getting home was going to suck, but at least he had Clementine here to cheer him up. Well, Tommy was improving his mood a bit too. Not that he’d ever tell him that.

Suddenly, an idea popped into Wilbur’s head.

He hadn’t been planning to hang out with Tommy again. But he was in a bit of a desperate bind here. If there was a way he could get out of having to walk through Phil’s dinner party, he would do it in a heartbeat.

“Tommy,” Wilbur began, shoving down the anxiety that twisted in his gut as Tommy glanced up again, “do you have any plans after work?”

Tommy frowned. “Not really. Was just gonna go back to my place and watch Netflix or something. Why?”

Well, he’d started this conversation, now he had to go through with his idea. It would be embarrassing as hell if Tommy said no, but it couldn’t hurt to just ask, right?

“Do you wanna go get food after we close up? I’ll pay,” Wilbur offered, trying not to sound too hopeful as he kept his eyes pointedly on Clementine.

There was a beat of silence as Tommy considered it. Wilbur cooed as Clementine licked his finger.

“Sure,” Tommy finally said, and Wilbur’s shoulders dropped in relief. “I don’t really, uh, eat out a lot though. So I don’t know any good places near here unless you wanna go to the diner again.”

It was the first time either of them had mentioned the diner since that night. While the food hadn’t been bad, it certainly wasn’t something he would eat when he was in a semi-normal state of mind, so Wilbur shook his head.

“Don’t worry. I know some good spots. There’s a Korean place nearby I really like if you’d wanna go there?”

“Haven’t really had much Korean food before, but I’m down,” Tommy agreed.

Wilbur smiled and straightened up from the counter. He turned to wander back between the bookshelves, and eyes lingered on the back of his head. Tommy was curious, and he could tell. Curious as to what brought this on. Again, he had fair reason for not wanting to go back to his house right after work tonight. But there was more to it than that. Since their diner night, there was something about Tommy that intrigued Wilbur. Maybe it was the fact that in a lot of strange ways he reminded Wilbur of his younger self, but was so drastically different from him at the same time. Or maybe it was how confidently he'd asked Wilbur what the TV station in his head was playing. The fact that despite their animosity, despite the fact that they were glorified strangers at that point, a part of him had clearly *cared*.

Maybe it was both. Maybe it was neither. Maybe Wilbur was just lonely.

He didn't know. But there was certainly a noticeable lightness to his shoulders that lasted for the rest of their shift.

After they had gone through the closing routine and Tommy had locked up the shop (since he was the senior employee of the two, he's the one who got to hold onto the keys), they both hopped into Wilbur's car. The sky was the color of burnt orange, a sign that winter was already on its last legs considering a few weeks ago, it had been completely dark whenever he left the bookstore. Tommy didn't say much as Wilbur drove them to the restaurant, but he did put his feet up on the dash, and Wilbur gave him a dirty look but didn't tell him to put his feet down.

A few minutes later they were sitting in the restaurant, paper napkins crinkling in Wilbur's hands as the smell of chili oil and roasting meat enveloped their table. The restaurant wasn't that busy at this time of night, because most of the college crowd would show up in a few more hours as they prepared to fill up before their evenings of partying.

Tommy had a laminated menu sitting on his lap, his eyebrows scrunched together as he skimmed through the options. Wilbur had only glanced at the menu before deciding what he was going to get. He'd been here enough times to have a favorite order already in mind from the moment he walked in the door.

"So it's just soup?"

Wilbur nodded. "Tofu soup with chili oil is the base, and they have different options for what additional things you can get in there. Like beef, seafood, vegetables, things like that."

"What do you usually get?" Tommy asked, looking up at him.

"I've tried a few things, but usually I like getting the one with beef and vegetables."

Tommy considered this carefully. "Do you not like seafood?"

"I like it. I just like the way the beef pairs with the chili oil more," Wilbur shrugged.

Bright blue eyes flickered back down to the menu. "Might get that too then," Tommy muttered.

Wilbur couldn't help but make a teasing cooing noise at that. "Aw, you wanna get the same thing I'm getting?"

Tommy immediately scowled. "It's not like that! I just don't know what's fucking good here!"

"I literally told you what's good here because I've tried a bunch of different things," Wilbur pointed out.

"Fuck off! I'll get something else then if you're gonna be such a bitch about it-" Tommy was cut off when a waiter came over to the table with a notepad in hand.

"Hi, what can I get for you both?" The waiter asked, glancing between them.

Before Tommy could open his mouth to call Wilbur a bitch again, Wilbur spoke up.

"We'll have two of the beef and vegetable soondubu bowls, medium spice for one, and mild spice for the child," Wilbur said, shooting Tommy a taunting smirk across the table.

"I'm not a fucking child! I can handle spice!" Tommy protested.

The waiter raised an eyebrow at him, looking Tommy up and down. "No, I think he's right. You should get mild."

Tommy gaped. "This is- This is ridiculous! I'm not a fucking baby! I can handle some spice!"

Sighing, Wilbur pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine, you take the medium one, and I'll take the mild one."

Seemingly satisfied at this, Tommy nodded and leaned back in his chair. The waiter sighed and wrote it down, before glancing up again. "Anything to drink?"

Now this made Wilbur freeze. His eyes lingered on the word *Sapporo* that stared at him from the menu, remembering how he'd gotten a beer every time he went to this place. It wasn't like he was an alcoholic. He could have a single beer, right?

For some reason, the longer he stared at the beer, the more his heart began to pound. A single beer wouldn't do anything to him. It wouldn't even make him buzzed. But if Phil or Techno found out, they'd take it again as a sign of him going backwards. Though it's not like they'd find out unless Wilbur told them. Why did it have to be a secret though? He was an adult. He was allowed to order a damn beer without-

"Sir?"

The waiter's voice cut through his startled thoughts. Shit. He was overthinking this again. The familiar hum of anxiety was already making him feel lightheaded the more he went back and forth on this.

"Just two waters," Wilbur said quickly, not letting himself think twice about it.

The waiter took their menus and hurried off, leaving Wilbur with his slowing heartbeat and Tommy with a puzzled look on his face.

Wilbur waited a few beats for Tommy to look away, or to ask what was clearly on his mind. His patience was rewarded when Tommy straightened up, resting his elbows on the counter. “Okay, so this is gonna sound rude when I say it-”

“You mean you’re not always trying to sound rude?”

“Fuck off. Anyway, I swear I don’t mean this in, like, a shitty way. But why the hell are we doing this?” Tommy winced at how harsh the words sounded, but pushed forward anyway. “I mean I know we agreed things were fine between us in the diner. But I just... I dunno, I guess I didn’t think you actually wanted to, like, hang out.”

Ah, there it was. There was something refreshing about Tommy’s bluntness. His inability to mince words. It was such a contrast to his own way of speaking, how he would do anything he could to hide the truth with layers of lace and glitter to make his empty words seem like far more than they were. Tommy was brash, loud, and didn’t cut corners. Wilbur liked that about him.

“I mean, I could tell you it was because I actually liked talking to you at the diner and thought it’d be nice to chat some more outside work,” Wilbur said, fighting the urge to twist his fingers in his lap. “That’s partly true. But you’re right, I do have another reason for why I invited you out tonight, and it’s kind of pathetic.” He paused and Tommy raised an eyebrow in silent question. “Basically, uh, my dad and my brother both work in the same department at the university, and they’re having a faculty party at our house tonight. I really didn’t wanna deal with the whole dinner party thing so I wanted to put off going home after work.”

Tommy blinked. “You just didn’t wanna go back to your place because your dad and brother are having people over?”

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur forced himself to nod. “Pathetic, right?”

He used to be great at talking to people. Phil would often joke that he had a siren tongue with the way he could make anyone like him in the first few minutes of meeting them. Back in his first year of college, he persuaded so many professors to give him better grades with a single visit during their office hours. He’d even been able to talk his way into a few frat parties, which were notorious for refusing to let any guy that wasn’t affiliated with a fraternity in unless he knew someone there.

But it was different now. Nothing about him was the same as it had once been. It was like he’d grown too big for his own skin, and was now stretched out in all the wrong ways. His knuckles felt tight, his breaths felt too short. Sometimes, despite the fact that nothing about his appearance had drastically changed from his first year of college, there were times he would pass a mirror and be startled by his reflection.

The words didn’t come as easily to him as they once did. Nothing came easily to him anymore.

“I don’t think it’s pathetic.”

Tommy’s words startled Wilbur out of his self pity. He froze, blinking at Tommy who was staring at him with some conflicting mix of disinterest and curiosity. Maybe that description didn’t make sense, but neither did Tommy.

“What do you mean?” Wilbur asked.

“I mean, you said it’s pathetic you don’t wanna deal with all those people at the dinner party. That’s not pathetic. I wouldn’t wanna do that either,” Tommy shrugged. “Sounds fucking boring as hell, if you ask me.”

Some of the tension in Wilbur’s shoulders leaked out at that. “Yeah, they’re all studying classics, which I don’t really know jack shit about except for what my dad and brother tell me.”

Tommy’s face screwed up at that. “Classics?”

“Y’know, like the study of Ancient Greece and Rome. Studying their philosophies, plays, history, that kind of stuff,” Wilbur explained.

“I’ve read a few Greek myths that I thought were cool. But if you don’t know anything about that shit I can’t imagine being surrounded by a bunch of people who teach that stuff would be very fun,” Tommy told him.

Just then, the waiter came back with their water, along with a small side of kimchi. Tommy immediately took a large gulp of his, while Wilbur thanked the waiter as he hurried off again.

“Yeah, it’s really not all that fun,” Wilbur huffed once the waiter was gone. “So, um, yeah. That’s why I invited you out. Mostly. I did actually like talking with you at the diner though.”

Tommy huffed. “You don’t have to pretend. I’m fine with being used an excuse to get out of going to something dumb like that.”

Wilbur frowned. “I’m not pretending.”

Something like surprise flashed through Tommy’s eyes, but he quickly shook it off and looked down at his water. “Seriously, it’s fine. I know I’m not exactly the most likeable guy around.”

“Tommy, I’m not lying. Sure, I thought you were a bit of an ass at first, but you’re actually a pretty funny guy,” Wilbur said, trying to get Tommy to believe he was telling the truth. He wasn’t sure why he was so insistent on this, but he hated seeing that grim acceptance in Tommy’s face when he said he wasn’t a likeable person. It was the acceptance of someone who had been told that far too many times. “If anything, I’m the pathetic twenty-three year old who’s hanging out with a teenager because I don’t wanna walk through a dinner party. You have more reason to pretend than I do.”

“Well, you *are* kind of lame,” Tommy snorted, smirking at him. “But, uh, I also like talking to you, so…” He trailed off, sipping his water and staring at the table, as if he was

embarrassed by the admission.

“C’mon, don’t bullshit me, man. You’re just here because I offered to pay for the food,” Wilbur joked, a hint of truth threading through his words that he hoped Tommy didn’t notice.

Unfortunately for him, Tommy seemed to be able to read him far better than most of the people around him at the moment, because he immediately frowned. “I’m not. Sure, free food is cool, but you gotta stop saying you’re pathetic and shit. You’re not.”

In a way, it was almost frightening how quickly Tommy could cut straight to the core of his words. Even his own father wasn’t this good at noticing when his self-deprecating jokes held just a bit too much truth in them, and yet, this teenager he’d only met a month before could call him out on his bullshit without any hesitation.

It was enthralling. It was terrifying.

Maybe that’s why even more honesty slipped through Wilbur’s lips when he spoke again. Because he knew Tommy would see through his lies anyway.

“Trust me, if you knew why I was stuck working at that bookstore, you’d realize I’m genuinely a very pathetic person,” Wilbur said quietly, all hints of teasing having dropped from his tone.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Tommy shot back. “It’s how you see yourself. Not the rest of the world.”

“You can’t know that. You barely know me,” Wilbur pushed, not sure what this strange pressure building in his head was.

“If you were really pathetic, you would’ve done a shit job at work to force Puffy to fire you. That’s what I kept waiting for you to do after that first day,” Tommy countered. “You didn’t want the job, but you didn’t pull that shit.”

“Puffy hired me out of pity. I’m a little sick of pity at this point,” Wilbur said, clenching his fists now.

“Pity is shit,” Tommy agreed, leaning back in his seat. “I don’t want it either.”

And something inside of Wilbur snapped at that. Not like a string that had been pulled too taut, snapping to fly back with explosive force. No, it snapped like something had been dragging the pit of his stomach into the ground had finally broken apart from him, and he could breathe again.

“So we’re on the same page then,” Wilbur mused, unclenching his fists.

“Seems we are. I won’t pity you, you won’t pity me,” Tommy said, nodding sagely.

Mirroring Tommy, Wilbur nodded as well. “We won’t pity each other.” He paused, using his chopsticks to grab a piece of kimchi from the dish. The sour, spicy taste of the cabbage exploded in his mouth. “I think we could be friends. And I’m not saying that out of pity.”

And Tommy-

Tommy smiled at that.

“I think we could be friends too.”

Wilbur mirrored his smile right as the waiter came back with their food, setting the steaming bowls in front of them, still boiling in their stone pots.

“I’ll warn you,” Wilbur started as he grabbed an egg from the basket on the table, hitting it against the corner and cracking it directly into the still boiling soup. “I have a lot of issues. I’m dramatic, moody, and I can be petty as hell when I’m pissed.”

“What is this, listing all of the shitty traits we have?” Wilbur shrugged, and Tommy huffed. “Fine. Well I’m annoying, loud, selfish, and a stubborn prick. How’s that for having issues?”

The grin on his face widened. Tommy knew exactly how to match him beat for beat.

“That’s brilliant.”

Tommy’s smile grew as well. “Now that we got that settled, why the fuck did you crack an egg into your soup?”

In the end, the dinner was far better than what would’ve happened if Wilbur had gone back to his house and hid in his room for the entire evening. Tommy ended up not being able to handle the medium spice soup at all, so they switched their bowls and Wilbur laughed when Tommy tried kimchi for the first time, scrunching up his entire face like he’d just sucked on a lemon.

When Wilbur got home from the restaurant, the dinner party had already ended. Techno was doing the dishes, while Phil was putting away the leftovers.

“Hey Wil,” Phil called out when he opened the front door, and Wilbur winced at having been heard. “You’re back late.”

“Uh, yeah, I texted Techno that I was getting dinner with a friend,” Wilbur said, hating how it felt like he was a teenager who just got caught sneaking out after curfew.

“A friend?” Phil questioned, raising an eyebrow.

“Was it Niki?” Techno asked. “She was asking me about you the other day.”

Wilbur shook his head. “It was just my coworker from the bookstore.”

At this, Phil’s face lit up, while Techno raised his eyebrows in obvious surprise.

“The one you pissed off on your first day?” Techno asked.

“Uh, yeah. I told Phil already that we made up.” He shifted from foot to food, the urge to run up to his room making him tense his legs. “Anyway, uh, I’m tired. So I’m gonna go lay

down.”

Disappointment made Phil deflate like a balloon that had been poked with a pin. Meanwhile, Techno met his eyes and gave him a small, almost imperceptible nod. Despite how crumpled the bridge between them was, he still knew Wilbur well enough to tell when he didn’t want to tell their dad all about the people he hung out with, like he was a kid talking about his friends at school.

“Are you sure you don’t want to sit down for some tea and-”

“Nah, I think Wil looks pretty tired,” Techno cut in. “Get to bed, man. You’re like a walkin’ zombie.”

Over Phil’s shoulder, Wilbur mouthed a silent ‘thank you’ and Techno only nodded in response.

“Alright then,” Phil sighed, covering a lasagna dish in saran wrap. “Night, Wil.”

“Night guys,” Wilbur said, before fleeing up the steps as fast as his legs could carry him.

## Chapter End Notes

soondubu is one of my favorite foods I had to promo it in this chapter. seriously if theres a soondubu place near you go get some it's amazing

anyway this chapter was a lot of fun for me to write, especially the dialogue! I had a really good time playing around with different ways to word things so I hope you guys enjoyed the conversations!

there's a playlist for this fic! check it out [here](#)

make sure to leave a comment telling me what you thought! I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees



# cast some light and you'll be alright

## Chapter Summary

This time, Tommy asks Wilbur if he wants to hang out.

## Chapter Notes

hi lovelies I'm here with more of this! ty all so much to the super kind responses I've gotten to vanderlyle so far, I'm both saddened so many of you can relate to this but also glad because that means I'm writing this well. this chapter is definitely a happier one, so get ready for some fun and sweet crimeboys bonding!

TWs: mention of a nosebleed, talk about emotional child neglect

hope you guys enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

To Wilbur's surprise, Tommy was the one to initiate their next outing.

In the middle of one of their shifts, when the only customer in the store was a blonde guy who seemed very engrossed in a *Percy Jackson* book, Tommy had just randomly asked the question without any kind of buildup.

"Do you wanna hang out this weekend?"

Glancing over his shoulder, Wilbur saw Tommy sitting with his knees pressed to his chest on his cash register chair, trying just a bit too hard to pretend to be focused on the book in his lap.

"This weekend?" Wilbur repeated, raising an eyebrow. Blue eyes flickered up to meet Wilbur's, and Tommy gave a small nod. "Sure. What were you thinking of doing?"

Tommy shrugged, eyes falling back to the book. "I'm not sure."

Wilbur snorted. "You asked me to hang out but didn't bother to think of what we'd actually be doing before asking?"

At this, Tommy scowled. "Well- I don't know! Friends are supposed to hang out, right?"

The teasing smirk immediately dropped from Wilbur's face, because neither of them had mentioned that conversation at the restaurant until now. He was right. Friends *did* hang out, and they had agreed to be friends.

"You're right," Wilbur acquiesced, giving Tommy a softer smile. "I'm sure we can figure out something to do."

"We could probably just get food again," Tommy shrugged, the tension visibly leaking out of his shoulders. "As long as it's not too expensive."

Wilbur furrowed his brows at that. Yes, they could just go get food again, but there had to be *something* else they could do. What did he do at college when he wasn't locking himself in his dorm to study?

Well, if he was hanging out with friends, they almost always were either going to get food or going to get drunk. Or both. Alcohol and food. The basis of a stereotypical college student's life.

Suddenly, an idea popped into Wilbur's head. His smile grew as he leaned over the counter, waiting until Tommy glanced up again.

"Say, Tommy, do you like music?"



A few days later, Wilbur found himself pulling into his university's parking garage for the first time in... well, a while.

He ignored the lump that formed in his throat when he spotted his old dorm building as he climbed out of his car, Tommy mirroring him on the opposite side. After making sure his parking permit was in full view so he wouldn't get a ticket (at least he had a reason to use it again after already prepaying for the entire quarter), he forced his eyes down and led Tommy out of the parking garage.

The entire walk across campus, Wilbur questioned why the hell he'd decided this was a good idea. Yeah, it would be fun, but he also hadn't been on his campus since the incident. He hadn't even gone to his own dorm to pack up his things. Phil and Techno had done that for him.

Nervous energy hummed through his veins, and he took to curling his hands in and out of fists as he listened to the click clack of his shoes against stone. Tommy stayed close to his side, his eyes wide as he looked at the tall brick buildings towering around them.

It was a weekend, so while the walkways weren't empty, they were significantly emptier than they would've been on a normal weekday. Wilbur was grateful for this, because it lowered the chances of him running into someone he knew.

The baby green leaves of budding spring rustled in the wind above their heads, and Wilbur heard the familiar croak of ravens calling to them from the branches. It was a windy day in

early spring, and Wilbur fiddled with the edges of his sweater sleeves while Tommy tugged his own jacket tighter around him.

“So are you gonna tell me what we’re doing at your school?” Tommy asked after a few minutes of walking in silence. “If it wasn’t Saturday, I’d think you were gonna take me to one of your classes which, no offense, sounds boring as shit.”

Wilbur rolled his eyes. “I’m not *in* classes right now, remember?”

“Well obviously I know that,” Tommy huffed, “which is why I’m really confused.”

“Shush, child. You’ll find out in a minute.”

Tommy frowned. “I’m not a child!”

“Yes you are. Anyway,” before Tommy could argue further, Wilbur grabbed his wrist and tugged him into the open air middle of a dorm building. It wasn’t the one he’d lived in when he’d left, but it was housing for the first years. The center was littered with a few couches and tables that were currently empty, and they passed by a small alcove that held the mail lockers where a girl seemed to be struggling with her passcode.

Passing by, they stopped in front of a door next to the mail lockers. Taking out his student ID, Wilbur scanned the scanner in front of the door, listening to it *click!* as it unlocked. Then, with one more grin thrown over his shoulder at Tommy, he opened the door with a grand flourish and gestured for Tommy to go inside.

“Holy shit, is that a piano?!”

Letting the door shut behind them, Wilbur flicked the light switch, and the contents of the room were illuminated in soft yellow light.

There was a piano shoved into the corner of the room, gleaming black and white with a bench worn down from years of use. A few handheld instruments like tambourines and conga drums were shoved into a corner, while some larger instruments like a cello and guitar were propped up on stands.

“Welcome to the music room,” Wilbur declared. “This place is technically supposed to be for any music majors who need to try out different stuff for their assignments, but it’s free for any student to use. You just have to reserve it beforehand, and I’ve booked us here for the next few hours.”

Tommy’s eyes widened. “Wait, so we’re allowed to use anything in here?”

Wilbur nodded, something warm sparking in his chest when he saw the excitement lighting up Tommy’s face. “Sure are. Obviously we can’t break it, but feel free to mess around with any instrument you want in here.”

As if that was the signal he was waiting for, Tommy bolted for the piano, almost falling over as he slid onto the bench. He put his fingers on the keys, pausing for a moment as he

squeezed his eyes shut. Then after a few beats, he opened them again, and started playing an upbeat tune.

His playing wasn't great. It was stilted, and he hit the wrong notes every so often, but it wasn't bad either. The tune he played was strangely familiar though, and it took Wilbur a few moments to recognize what it was.

"Is that the fucking Able Sisters theme from *Animal Crossing*?" Wilbur asked.

Tommy beamed, and nodded as he kept playing. "Sure is, big man! It's only the best song in the entire history of music!"

Wilbur smiled, sitting down on the bench next to Tommy and watching as his fingers hopped between the keys. "How'd you learn to play piano? Did you get lessons as a kid?"

The song cut off as Tommy's fingers went still, and Wilbur wondered if he said something wrong as Tommy was quiet for a beat too long.

For a moment, Wilbur wondered if he'd messed up and asked something that upset Tommy. But before he could worry too much, Tommy started talking.

"Um... kind of? We had this big grand piano in our house when I was growing up, and I always wanted to learn how to play it. But my parents never really, um, offered to get me lessons or anything. So I looked up a tutorial for how to play the Able Sisters song and memorized it," Tommy explained, keeping his eyes on the keys.

This was the first time Tommy had mentioned his parents without Wilbur asking about them first. The fact was, Wilbur didn't know a single thing about Tommy's home life, and this was the only hint he'd gotten as to where this kid even came from.

There were so many questions Wilbur could pull from that tiny sliver of information alone. Tommy had talked about needing his bookstore job to pay bills, but grand pianos weren't cheap things to own. And instead of saying his parents couldn't afford to give him lessons, Tommy had just said they didn't offer. They were tiny details, but it was painting a picture that didn't match up in Wilbur's head.

But judging by the way the excitement had drained out of Tommy's face, leaving an ashen shade cast over him, Wilbur had a feeling that this wasn't a subject Tommy wanted to talk about. And Wilbur knew all about not wanting to talk about certain things, so he decided not to press the issue.

"So Able Sisters is the only thing you can play?" Wilbur asked instead.

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, pretty much."

There was the string pulled taut between their silence. Wilbur let it hang there for a moment, before he remembered the guitar sitting only a few feet away.

"Well, I don't know how to play piano, but I *do* know how to play guitar," Wilbur said, getting up from the bench and picking the guitar off the ground. "If you want, I can show you

some basic things to play?”

And just like that, the spark was back in Tommy’s eyes as he scrambled off the piano bench and over to where Wilbur had sat himself against the wall. “Oh fuck yeah, that’d be so cool!”

Handing the guitar over to Tommy, Wilbur showed him where to put his fingers on the fingerboard. He’d never tried to teach someone guitar before, so he backtracked a few times on his instructions when he realized they weren’t very clear.

After a little bit though, he’d gotten the basics down. Tommy was a surprisingly eager learner, and had a grin stretching from ear to ear as he started to strum the basic chords Wilbur taught him.

The strumming wasn’t perfect, but it still created a recognizable harmony. Wilbur matched Tommy’s grin, and once Tommy got in the groove, he started to sing the lyrics to the song he’d picked for Tommy to learn.

*“Don’t you know that I’ll be around to guide you?”* Wilbur sang, Tommy’s eyes widening when he heard Wilbur’s voice. *“Through your weakest moments to leave them behind you.”*

Tommy stopped strumming. “I didn’t know you could sing.”

Wilbur shrugged. “I do it for fun. It’s not something I pursue or anything though.”

“You’re good though,” Tommy said, raising an eyebrow. “Have you ever written your own music?”

“A little bit,” Wilbur admitted, folding his hands in his lap. “I’ve tried writing a few songs, but it’s not something I ever had much time to do.”

“Did you ever finish anything?”

“Uh, kind of?”

Tommy’s eyes glittered with excitement. “You should play it for me.” Then, before Wilbur could protest, he was shoving the guitar into Wilbur’s hands.

He wasn’t getting out of this one, was he?

Sighing, Wilbur readjusted the guitar in his lap, arranging his fingers on the fingerboard and mentally going through his songs to figure out which one Tommy would like the most. His heart was pounding a bit faster than normal because he hadn’t played for an audience in a while.

During his gap year on the road, Wilbur had played for different crowds in different cities all over the country. But there hadn’t been the same kind of pressure there was now. Those people didn’t know him. To them, he was just a mysterious vagabond. A faceless guitar player whose music they would enjoy for a few minutes, but forget by the end of the day.

Now he was playing for Tommy. His new friend. Someone who would definitely remember what he was going to play for him.

Taking a breath to steady himself, Wilbur began to strum.

*"I've lost the passion that comes with living, since I started university."*

Tommy sat patiently throughout the entire song, eyes wide and full of wonder that sparked something warm in Wilbur's chest. By the time he'd played the last note, Tommy was full on gaping at him, and Wilbur awkwardly let the guitar rest against his chest as he twisted his fingers together.

"So?"

"That was amazing!" Tommy exclaimed, a bright smile lighting up his entire face like the sun. "That was such a cool song! The lyrics were also really cool. You're fucking cracked at songwriting."

"I'm not that great. Still figuring out a lot of--"

"Shut up," Tommy snapped, cutting him off. "You're good, and I don't wanna hear any bullshit that you're not. Do you, like, do writing stuff at all? Like not just songs but in general? I feel like you'd be really good at it."

Wilbur shrugged. "I used to journal a bit, but that's about it."

"You should go back to doing it. Like try out poetry and stuff. Feel like you'd be real pog at it."

"You think I should write poetry?" Wilbur questioned, raising an eyebrow. Tommy nodded, and he huffed. "I haven't really read much poetry. Never really been my jam."

"Well, I can recommend you some stuff next time we're at the bookstore," Tommy told him.

Wilbur frowned. "You read poetry?"

Tommy blinked. "Wil, I've worked at a bookstore for over a year. I've read a lot of stuff."

Oh yeah. Tommy *did* always have a book on his lap when he was working the register. "Fair enough. If you wanna give me poetry recommendations then, I'll take them." Then, he shoved the guitar back at Tommy. "But for now we're gonna continue your guitar lesson. What song do you wanna learn next?"

Fumbling to put the guitar back in his lap, Tommy's eyebrows scrunched together in thought. After a few seconds, his eyes lit up. "Can I play Able Sisters on the guitar?"

Sighing, Wilbur pulled out his phone to look up a tutorial for how to play the Able Sisters theme on a guitar.

The two spent the next hour struggling to figure out the easiest way to play the Able Sisters theme. At one point, Tommy went back over to the piano to play it while Wilbur accompanied him on the guitar, and it didn't actually sound half bad, which was a surprise. Then they messed around on some of the other instruments, with Tommy trying to hit Wilbur in the head with a maraca, and Wilbur using conga drums to try and tap out the beat to *Dancing Queen*.

The light from outside began to wane. Soon, the sky was the color of an orange rind, and when Wilbur checked his phone, he realized his reservation was up.

They left the music room, although it was obvious Tommy was disappointed they had to go. But as they headed back in the direction of the parking lot, Wilbur took a sharp turn left, and Tommy frowned as he veered to follow him.

"Aren't we heading back to the car?" Tommy asked, glancing up at the quickly darkening sky.

Grinning, Wilbur shook his head. "Nope. Not yet."

He refused to elaborate further than that. Tommy seemed like he wanted to ask more about it, but he must've sensed it was a futile effort, because he just fell right back into step next to Wilbur without complaint.

Without the sun, the breeze that had been blowing before was even colder now. Tommy had fully zipped up his jacket, while Wilbur wrapped his arms around himself, somewhat regretting not having brought something to layer over his sweater. But he knew it didn't matter because they wouldn't be cold for very long.

Soon, Wilbur could hear the distant thumping of a bass. They reached the edge of the main part of campus, and Wilbur turned down a steep hill, trees clustering around the road as the thumping got louder.

Then, the venue came into focus.

It wasn't anything special. A small, one story building sat nestled in the trees right on the edge of campus, with neon lights flashing from the windows. Bright graffiti streaked the sides of the building, with the words *Pogtopia* scrawled across the top in neon pink letters.

"What is this place?" Tommy asked as they lined up in front of the door, Wilbur pulling up the ticket email he had on his phone to show the bouncer.

"It's Pogtopia, a music venue here on campus," Wilbur explained, the music getting louder as the line inched closer to the entrance. "I saw they were having a show tonight so I thought it'd be fun for us to go."

Tommy frowned. "Do we need tickets?"

Wilbur nodded, showing his phone screen to Tommy. "Already got us some."

"Wh- I could've paid for my own ticket!" Tommy protested.

“Relax, child. It was only five bucks,” Wilbur snorted. Tommy huffed, looking displeased, but didn’t say anything as Wilbur flashed his phone screen to the bouncer.

And just like that, they were inside.

The thudding of a bass pounded through Wilbur’s head like a jackhammer. Neon lights flashed all around, and students clustered towards the front of the room, creating a throng in front of the very small stage that the band was already set up on.

Pogtopia wasn’t a very large venue. Not width-wise *or* height-wise. Wilbur had to duck to avoid hitting his head on some of the wooden rafters as they got closer to the stage, where Wilbur could see some local rock band he’d never heard of already shredding it with an energy that practically crackled in the air.

Glancing at Tommy, Wilbur beamed when he saw how the kid’s eyes had gone as wide as saucers. The beat was infectious, and Wilbur was already bopping his head along to it. Tommy, he noticed, was bouncing on the heels of his feet in time with the bass.

“You wanna get closer?” Wilbur asked, having to shout to be heard over the music.

Tommy nodded and they pressed further into the crowd. Bodies pressed against him, the smell of sweat heavy in the air, and Wilbur grabbed Tommy’s arm so he didn’t lose him in the throng. Once they had reached a decent middle point, Wilbur stopped pushing forward, because they were both tall enough to see the band over the heads of most of the other concert-goers.

The energy was infectious. Both of them banged their heads in time with the beat, and the crowd ebbed and flowed in time with the music. The current song ended and the next one started up immediately. More people got into the rhythm, dancing and flailing to their heart's content.

Wilbur noticed someone pushing a girl up onto the low rafter beams. She hung upside-down, her dark hair nearly touching the floor as she cheered and bopped her head along to the beat. A few others mimicked her, some sitting on top of the rafters, while others hung upside-down.

So distracted by the rafter people, Wilbur didn’t feel the crowd moving back until he was being shoved against the wall with Tommy at his side.

“What’s happening?” Tommy shouted, the beat still going strong.

Frowning, Wilbur looked over the crowd and saw they were forming a circle near the front of the stage. When he saw the first people sprint into the circle, he suddenly realized what was going on.

“It’s a mosh pit!” Wilbur explained, ducking down so Tommy could hear him better.

Tommy blinked. “What the hell’s that?!”



“It’s when people at a concert all just kind of run around and slam into each other as hard as they can. It’s kind of like dancing, but it’s more just about how hard you can shove everyone around you.”

More people jumped into the mosh pit, and Wilbur watched as everyone really started going ham on the shoving.

“Why the fuck would anyone do that?! It sounds like it hurts!” Tommy exclaimed, narrowing his eyes as a small girl slammed into a guy at least a full foot taller than her.

“It’s an adrenaline rush! But it can definitely hurt,” Wilbur explained, wincing when he saw another guy get elbowed in the face.

Wilbur had been in a mosh pit once before. He’d been at a concert at this same venue in his first year that Niki had invited him too. It had been him, Niki, Eret, and Fundy. Wilbur had been unsure about jumping in the mosh pit, but Fundy had already jumped in there and it looked fun, so Wilbur had followed.

Moshing was... overwhelming to say the least. You were being shoved in every single direction all at once, and couldn’t stand still for more than a second at most. Someone was always running into you, and it was a fight just to keep yourself standing. It was impossibly dizzying. You couldn’t see because of how quickly you kept changing directions, the music was pounding in your ears making it impossible to hear anything else, and the only thing you could feel were the warm hands slamming into your sides.

But it was also strangely exhilarating. Your heart was thundering in your ribcage, and you could throw your whole weight into shoving into the person nearest to you. Although Wilbur wouldn’t exactly say it was his favorite thing to do, it certainly had its perks.

Suddenly, Tommy was straightening up. “I wanna try it.”

“Wait, seriously?” Wilbur blinked. “Tommy, are you sure? You could get a bloody nose, man.”

Tommy turned to him and grinned, his eyes glittering in the neon lights of the room. “I wanna shove someone!”

Well, a mosh pit was great for getting out that urge.

“Well, I’m not gonna join you, so be careful,” Wilbur said, patting his shoulder.

Giving him a mock salute, Tommy wove through the crowd to get to the mosh pit before the current song ended. Wilbur watched as he jumped into the middle, and thankfully Tommy was taller than most of the mosh pit members, so it was easy for Wilbur to keep an eye on him as he was shoved from side to side.

He seemed to be having fun. His face was lit up with a smile, and he was running at people full speed, having picked up on the general gist of moshing faster than Wilbur had his first time. When the song ended, Wilbur expected Tommy to come rushing back to him, but he

didn't. Instead, he hung in the mosh pit, waiting for the next song to start as he bounced on the heels of his feet.

Wilbur snorted at the sight. Guess Tommy was made for that sort of high energy type of dancing.

"Alright everyone," the singer of the band suddenly called into the mic, "I want you all in the pit to split down the middle! We're doing a wall of death!"

Oh. That might not be good.

Tommy frowned, looking confused as everyone in the pit began to split evenly to two sides. Someone grabbed him by the arm and yanked him onto one side, and while Wilbur knew he should probably try to get over there to explain what was about to happen, he also knew he wasn't going to be able to shove his way over there in time.

Because of how small the venue was, it was a tiny wall of death. Nothing compared to the videos Wilbur had seen online at proper heavy metal concerts or anything. But Wilbur was still nervous as the singer counted down with his band playing along, while Tommy looked around in confusion for what to do.

When the singer dropped his hand, everyone sprinted for the middle of the pit. Tommy got shoved along, and soon the pit was back in full force. Wilbur lost sight of Tommy in the crowd, and it took another full minute for him to spot Tommy's head again.

Tommy was grinning like a maniac, shoving and slamming into people like he was born to do it. By the time that song ended, he finally made his way out of the pit, and Wilbur grinned as Tommy sprinted over.

"That was so fun!" Tommy exclaimed, beaming at him.

Wilbur opened his mouth to reply, but paused when he noticed the dried blood under Tommy's nose. "Oh shit, man! You're bleeding!"

Tommy frowned. "I am?" He brought a hand up to his nose, stiffening when his fingers touched the dried blood. "Holy shit, I didn't even notice!"

"Probably the adrenaline," Wilbur muttered, frowning as he glanced between Tommy and the mosh pit. "Here, let's go get some air."

Thankfully, Tommy didn't argue. Wilbur dragged him out of the building and into the small, fenced off backyard where a table had been set up to sell t-shirts for the band. Cool night air made goosebumps rise on Wilbur's arms, and he noticed a few other students chatting in hushed voices, seemingly relieved to not have to shout over the music to be heard.

"That was so much fun," Tommy said as he wiped the dried blood off with his sleeve. "Like, holy shit, your brain just goes brrrr when you're in the pit!"

Wilbur snorted at Tommy's description. "That's true. It's pretty exhilarating for sure."

Digging into his pocket, Wilbur pulled out a cigarette, ignoring Tommy's frown as he put it between his teeth. Then, he got out his lighter, and had to click it a few times to get the flame to catch in the wind.

He sucked in a drag, shoulders dropping as the warm smoke lightly burnt the back of his throat. His head was still pounding in time with the music, and the cigarette helped calm his nerves somewhat. The grey plumes curled in front of his face, and next to him, Tommy scoffed.

"I didn't know you smoked."

"I do and it kind of sucks," Wilbur admitted with a shrug. "Don't start smoking. You don't want this habit."

"Had no plans to," Tommy said, scrunching up his nose in disgust. "Smells like shit anyway."

Wilbur was about to nod in agreement, when another voice cut in from behind.

"Holy shit, is that Wilbur Soot?"

Immediately, Wilbur's heart dropped into his stomach. He knew that voice.

Taking another shaky inhale of his cigarette, Wilbur fought to keep his face flat as he turned around to see his old friends.

Fundy and Quackity were stood side by side, both gaping at Wilbur like they had seen a ghost. Great. Fucking great. Some of the last people he wanted to see.

"Uh, hey guys," Wilbur said, shoving down the anxiety already trying to crawl up his throat.

"Wh- 'hey guys'? That's all we fucking get?" Fundy exclaimed, frowning at him. "Dude, where the hell have you been!"

"We thought you might've died or something," Quackity added, and although it was obvious that it was supposed to be a joke, Wilbur couldn't help but wince at how close to the truth it was.

"Didn't Niki tell you guys I dropped my classes for the quarter?" Wilbur asked, frowning at them both.

"Well, she did, yeah. But she didn't tell us why or anything," Fundy said, the white streaks in his hair nearly glowing in the low light. "You haven't been answering any of our texts either."

Wilbur looked at the ground, shame washing over him. "Um, I've just been, uh, busy." Shit. Fuck. Shit fuck shit. He should've prepared for this. He knew he could run into people he knew coming here. Why the hell didn't he come up with an excuse ahead of time?

"Care to elaborate on that?" Quackity pushed.

Shrinking further in on himself, Wilbur noticed his hand holding the cigarette was trembling. “Shit just got, uh, kind of complicated with school. I decided I needed a break.”

“Again?” And, well, ouch. Even though Wilbur knew Quackity wasn’t trying to be mean, the obvious judgement in his voice was enough to make him flinch.

Before Wilbur could open his mouth to try and reply though, Tommy’s brash voice cut in.

“Wil, my curfew is coming up soon so we should go.” Wilbur jumped when Tommy spoke, because he’d honestly forgotten that Tommy was still there.

Fundy and Quackity seemed equally surprised by Tommy speaking up.

“Uh, who’s the kid?” Fundy asked, furrowing his brows.

“I’m Wilbur’s friend,” Tommy answered before Wilbur could, looping his elbow through Wilbur’s and glaring at both Fundy and Quackity. “Like I said, my curfew is soon and my mum is gonna be pissed as shit at me if I don’t get back in time, so Wil’s gotta drive me home.”

Curfew? Tommy hadn’t mentioned anything about a curfew, nor had he mentioned a single thing about his mum before. But if he was being serious and he had to go, Wilbur would gladly take the excuse to get out of the conversation.

“Uh, yeah, sorry guys but he’s right,” Wilbur jumped in, nodding profusely. “I gotta get him back. We’ll catch up later though, alright?”

Then, before either Fundy or Quackity could push the issue further, Tommy started dragging Wilbur towards the exit.

Behind him, Wilbur heard Quackity call out, “Just text us, man! We’re worried about you!”

Wilbur didn’t turn around to meet their eyes at that, instead letting Tommy pull him away from the venue and back up the hill.

Once they were out of sight of Pogtopia, Tommy dropped Wilbur’s arm. The stars above their heads twinkled in the chilly night air, and Wilbur realized he’d dropped his cigarette during their escape.

His breath formed small clouds in front of his face as he walked. Beside him, Tommy wrapped his jacket tighter around himself.

“You didn’t mention you had a curfew before,” Wilbur said after a few minutes of silent walking.

Tommy snorted. “I made that up. You looked like you were about to crawl out of your fucking skin talking to those guys, so I just bullshitted that so we’d have an excuse to leave.”

*Oh.*

While Wilbur thought he was at least half-decent at hiding his anxiety from others, it seemed like he wasn't nearly as subtle as he thought. A part of him wanted to be embarrassed that Tommy had felt like he needed to rescue Wilbur from a conversation with his own friends, but instead, all he felt was gratitude.

"Thanks. I just- I didn't really feel like trying to find a way to explain my shit to them right then," Wilbur said, wrapping his arms around himself as gravel crunched under his shoes.

Tommy shrugged. "S'fine, no need to thank me. What else are friends for, y'know?"

Wilbur shot a small smile Tommy's way at that, and Tommy hesitated for only a second before returning it.

Another beat of silence passed between them.

"So you really don't have a curfew or anything?" Wilbur then asked, the question sitting at the forefront of his mind. "Like, your mum isn't gonna be pissed that you're hanging out with a college student late at night or anything?"

Tommy didn't respond for a moment. His smile had disappeared, and he was keeping his eyes on the ground as they walked. Then, he stopped dead in his tracks, and Wilbur stopped too.

"I haven't talked to my parents in two years," Tommy told him, lifting his chin to meet Wilbur's eyes with a flat stare. "So no, my mum doesn't care."

...what?

Wilbur blinked, struggling to comprehend what Tommy just told him. "Wh- What do you mean you haven't talked to your parents in two years? You're seventeen, don't you live with them?"

"I was legally emancipated when I was fifteen," Tommy said, shaking his head. "I've been living on my own ever since."

Oh.

All at once, everything about Tommy made so much more sense. The reason he was so desperate to get the job at Puffy's bookstore was because he had to pay his own bills. The reason why he never spoke about his parents was because he presumably just didn't have much of a relationship with them.

Tommy was... alone. Seventeen years old and completely on his own.

The realization made Wilbur's chest ache like he'd been hit with a brick.

"Can I ask why?" Wilbur asked softly. "If you don't want to talk about it that's fine, but-"

"Nah, I can talk about it. It's not like I'm traumatized because of them or anything," Tommy said, resuming his walking. "They weren't abusive or any shit like that. It was kind of the

opposite in fact.” He paused, pulling his jacket tighter around himself. “They just didn’t do... anything to me. Never talked to me. Never really acknowledged my existence outside of giving me food. I think they never meant to have a kid, so they just tried to pretend I didn’t exist.”

Fucking hell.

“That’s- Jesus Christ, Tommy. That’s neglect,” Wilbur pointed out, frowning at him.

Tommy shrugged. “Not in the legal sense. I had food, water, roof over my head ‘n all. But I just didn’t feel like a person when I was in that house. And eventually I just felt like I was gonna go fucking insane if I stayed there any longer.” A bitter laugh tore from his throat. “Y’know, when I brought the emancipation papers to my dad so he could sign them, I thought I might get *something* from him. Like, I thought I would see at least some kind of regret, or maybe sadness. But when he read the words at the top of the documents, I realized he was relieved. Relieved that he could finally get rid of me.” Tommy scoffed and shook his head. “I haven’t talked to them since I moved out. My mum tried to call me once, but I didn’t pick up and she didn’t try again after that.”

Bile rose in the back of Wilbur’s throat. Tommy really had no one. His parents didn’t care at all.

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur said because he wasn’t sure what else to say, and he winced at how pathetic it sounded in the wake of what Tommy told him.

“It’s fine. We all got our own shit to deal with,” Tommy said, turning off the asphalt and back onto the sidewalk that led to the parking garage. “You got whatever the hell is going on with you and school, I got this, everyone’s got something.”

Wilbur supposed that was true. But he didn’t like the way Tommy said that. Like it was something he could just dismiss because everyone had their own problems.

But at the same time, he had a feeling this wasn’t a subject Tommy wanted to linger on. So instead of pushing it, Wilbur just slung an arm around Tommy’s shoulders and pulled him close to his side. Tommy didn’t fight against it, and they stayed like that all the way back to the parking garage.

## Chapter End Notes

in case you all were wondering, the song Wilbur first sang with Tommy was 'Crosses' by José González (which is also where the chapter title comes from)

also, can you tell I was thinking about how much I miss mosh pits while writing this? the entirety of the pogtopia venue and the mosh pit there was just me referencing a concert I went to a few years back at a place exactly like how I described pogtopia, and

it had a mosh pit that I had a great time in. mosh pits are just so fun man I really wanna go to a concert where there's one going on again

anyway! wilbur is still ignoring his school friends but at least he has tommy! his emotional support gremlin, if you will LKDJSL

I have a playlist for this fic! go check it out [here](#)

please leave a comment if you enjoyed! i don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# **a heart that offends with its lonely and greedy demands**

## Chapter Summary

Techno has some concerns.

## Chapter Notes

hello hello yes I have been posting quite a lot lately, that's what happens when you prewrite a 40kish word fic and then decide to post one chapter every other day lmao

anyway I'm back with more depress- I mean more vanderlyle! haha! god this fic is sad BUT it has a happy ending dlskjfkldsf

as always tysm for the love you've given this so far!

TWs for this chapter: minor panic attack

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After that, Wilbur and Tommy started hanging out outside of work far more often.

It became a regular thing for the two of them to go get dinner together after their shift at the bookstore ended. Sometimes they would go to a cool place like the soondubu restaurant Wilbur had brought them to one time, but other times they would go back to that diner and talk about the most random of subjects over tepid eggs and soggy hashbrowns.

On days off from work, Wilbur might drive them to a park, or they would go back to the music room on campus. Sometimes Wilbur would bring his own guitar with him, and he would continue his lessons with Tommy, although the only thing Tommy really seemed to be interested in learning how to master on the guitar was the Able Sisters theme. Even when they weren't hanging out in person, Tommy was almost always texting reading recommendations to Wilbur, and Wilbur would send his thoughts as he read through the different poetry books Tommy sent him.

Surprisingly, Wilbur found himself really enjoying the poetry Tommy sent him. While he had never thought of himself as much of a poetry guy, Tommy was right in saying that it was similar to song lyrics in certain ways. Pouring feelings onto paper in a way that had rhythm and flowed off the tongue in ways that didn't always make sense, but let the emotion shine through anyway.

He liked it. A lot.



His routine now went like this: work, hang out with Tommy, sleep. It was just so... easy for Tommy to become an integral part of his life. Wilbur never had to worry about things being awkward with him, because nothing was ever awkward between them. They had the same sense of humor, their banter could go back and forth for hours on end, and it just felt like Tommy was one of the few people Wilbur didn't have to try around. He didn't have to put on a charming face because Tommy just liked Wilbur as he was.

Not to mention, Tommy was a great distraction from thinking about his problems. Whenever he got too anxious thinking about school, he would just text Tommy, and the two would go back and forth about whatever stupid shit they could come up with.

His other friends still tried to text him. Wilbur continued to ignore them.

It wasn't a perfect solution. When Tommy wasn't responding to his texts, Wilbur could feel his dread creeping up inside of him, ready to drag him into a spiral that would drown him if he didn't find a way out of it. But Wilbur was feeling better about himself for the time being, so he considered that a win.

Apparently his family didn't feel the same way.

One night, as Wilbur was shuffling around his room preparing to go to bed, he heard a soft knock at his door.

He'd gotten home late because he and Tommy had gone to a pho place for dinner after their shift. At one point during their meal, Tommy made Wilbur laugh so hard he almost spat soup broth all over their table, and the waiter had shot them a dirty look that only made him laugh more. He was still grinning at the memory as he tossed his dirty clothes in his laundry hamper, but froze when he heard knocking.

"Who is it?" Wilbur called out.

"It's Techno." His brother's voice was low, and muffled slightly by the door between them. "Can I come in?"

Wilbur frowned. If anything, Phil seemed far more likely to be the one knocking on his door late at night for no apparent reason.

"Uh, sure."

The door creaked open, and Wilbur settled himself on the edge of his bed as Techno came in. His hair was loose around his shoulders, the pink strands falling in waves from the braid he'd kept his hair in all day. He was in pajamas like Wilbur was, and he wondered if Techno had been trying to sleep when he heard Wilbur come home.

Techno hovered in his doorway, seeming unsure if he was allowed to fully step inside. Scooting to the side, Wilbur patted the spot on the bed next to him, and Techno huffed as he shut the door behind him and sat down where Wilbur had told him.

Things were silent for a moment. The wire was pulled taut between them.

“So,” Techno began, staring at his hands in his lap, “you were out late.”

“I got dinner with Tommy after work,” Wilbur explained, trying not to sound defensive because he knew Techno wasn’t trying to accuse him of anything.

Techno huffed. “Figured. You two seem to be hangin’ out a lot these days.”

Wilbur narrowed his eyes, unable to read Techno’s tone. “Is that a problem?”

“No, ‘course not. Dad’s glad you’re spending time with people again,” Techno said, glancing up to meet his eyes.

There was a silent *but* that hung between them. Wilbur’s eyes narrowed further.

“You don’t feel the same as dad?”

Techno took a deep breath, dropping the eye contact almost as quickly as he had initiated it. He seemed to be struggling to figure out how to word what he wanted to say, which was unusual for him. Techno wasn’t a man of words in the sense that he didn’t twist them around, hide the true meaning of what he was saying with fake compliments and white lies. Techno was straightforward, so it was unusual for him to seem so unsure about how to articulate what was on his mind.

“Whatever you wanna say, just say it straight up,” Wilbur said, a sharp edge lining his voice.

Techno was silent for another beat. Then, he looked up again.

“Fine. I’ll just say it then. I think you’re spending too much time with Tommy.”

Wilbur frowned. “What? He’s my friend, what the hell is wrong with having friends?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it, but it seems like he’s the only person you’re spending time with these days, and Dad and I still haven’t even met him. You’re ignoring all of your other friends, which I know because I got lunch with Niki today and she says literally everyone in your friend group keeps asking about you because you won’t respond to their texts. You always come home after dad and I have already had dinner, and you just go straight to your room without talking to either one of us,” Techno said, his expression unreadable as he stared at Wilbur.

“I- I’m not ignoring my other friends! It’s just hard to talk to them when all they wanna know is why the hell I’m not in classes,” Wilbur snapped, glaring at his brother. “And I’m not ignoring you guys on purpose. I’m just tired after work and don’t really have the energy to talk.”

“Really?” Techno raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re not purposefully going out with Tommy every night so you can delay the time before you come home? Just so you can avoid talking to us?”

Wilbur clenched his jaw. That- That definitely wasn’t what he was doing. He was just spending time with his friend.

“I thought you guys wanted me to get into a routine with my job, make new friends, stuff like that. I’ve done that, and now I’m getting fucking criticized for it,” Wilbur scoffed, shaking his head. “Would you rather I go back to sitting in my room staring at the ceiling all fucking day? Would that make you happy, Techno?”

“You know that’s not what I’m saying, Wilbur,” Techno shot back. “I’m saying I know you, and I can tell when you’re avoiding your problems.”

“What problems am I trying to avoid? I still go to therapy every goddamn week! I’m not avoiding my problems there!”

Techno rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and you still clam up anytime someone mentions school to you. Not to mention, you’re still trying to say that the aspirin was an accident. Literally nothing has changed from the first day you moved back here and now.”

Anger flared up in Wilbur’s chest like a flame. How dare Techno talk about this shit like he knows him. Techno hasn’t known him in years.

“What the fuck do you want me to say? If I say, ‘oh yeah I tried to kill myself’ will that make you happy, Techno? You want me to act all sad and go ‘oh boohoo I tried to commit suicide, I’m so depressed and my life is shit’? Because I didn’t try to kill myself!”

“And I know that’s not true, because you’re not that stupid, Wilbur. You wouldn’t take a whole bottle of aspirin by accident, even if you were drunk out of your mind,” Techno said, narrowing his eyes behind his glasses.

A bitter laugh scraped its way out of Wilbur’s throat. “Oh, and you know me so well, Techno?”

“I’m your older brother. I’d like to think I know you pretty damn well.”

The next words that bubbled past Wilbur’s lips were ones that had been on the tip of his tongue for months—possibly even years—but they were words he never wanted to voice out loud.

But in that moment, with his spinning head and anger flickering inside of his chest like a fire had been lit where his heart should be, he couldn’t stop the words from leaving his mouth.

“Let’s stop bullshitting. You and I both know we haven’t been brothers in years.”

Techno’s eyes widened at this, and regret immediately colored Wilbur’s face. But it was too late. The damage had been done, and if he stopped to actually think about what he said, he would break down.

So to avoid that, he decided his only option was to keep going.

“Wilbur, c’mon, that’s not-”

“Can we please stop with the pretending!” Wilbur cut him off, knowing he was shouting now and was probably going to wake up Phil. “I feel like a fucking stranger in this house! You and

dad go and talk about your classics shit that I don't understand, and I know that neither of you have the slightest damn clue how to talk to me. I feel like I'm a goddamn wild animal you two caught and don't know what to do with now, and you're trying to figure out how to rehabilitate me before you can get rid of me again!"

Techno blinked. "How long have you felt like this?"

Wilbur huffed. "Take a wild fucking guess. It's been longer than the past few months, that's for damn sure."

And then, there was the silence between them again. It was no longer a taut wire, but was more like a suffocating blanket. Wilbur couldn't breathe, his chest rising and falling in an uneven rhythm that was making his head feel like it was stuffed with cotton. Techno didn't seem to be doing much better, his hands curled into fists so tight, his knuckles had turned white.

"You could've told us that. Me and dad," Techno said softly after nearly two minutes of silence.

Another laugh burst from his chest, and it was an ugly, rotting sound. "Yeah right. Because we're all so damn great at talking about emotions in this family."

There was another pause. Wilbur's heart was pounding in his ears.

"I... I don't know what you want me to say here, Wil."

Wilbur couldn't remember the last time he'd heard his older brother sound so lost.

Something like guilt squeezed his chest, but it was easy to ignore because the burning flames were so much more noticeable.

"I want you to get out of my room," Wilbur spat out, his head throbbing with an oncoming headache.

Clenching his jaw, Techno seemed as though he wanted to argue. But when he turned to meet Wilbur's eyes again, he must've seen something that made him change his mind, because all the tension left his shoulders in one huge sigh.

"Alright."

For some reason, tears burned in Wilbur's eyes as he watched Techno get up and walk to the door. But he didn't let them fall. He fought to keep his expression flat as the door creaked open once again.

Techno paused in the doorway, opening his mouth like he was going to say something else. But then he met Wilbur's eyes, and his mouth closed again.

He left without saying another word. The click of the door shutting echoed around his room, and it reminded Wilbur of a coffin lid slamming shut.

Taking a shaky breath, Wilbur grabbed a pillow off his bed and screamed into it as loud as he dared. His heart was still pounding in his ears, and as the flames died down in his chest, the guilt took center stage. It was a pressure around his lungs, it was weighing down his shoulders, it was *suffocating* because Wilbur had never meant to say those things out loud. Especially not to his brother.

But he'd done it. He'd done it and there was nothing he could do to change it now. If the bridge between them had been crumpled before, Wilbur had a feeling he'd just taken a bulldozer and completely demolished it.

Without thinking, Wilbur picked his phone up off the nightstand and dialed the most recent contact he'd called.

The phone only rang twice before it picked up.

“Ello?” Tommy answered, sounding like he was half-asleep.

“Tommy?” Wilbur whispered, wincing at the way his voice cracked. “Sorry were you, uh, sleeping?”

The shift was immediate. “No, I wasn't sleeping,” Tommy said, sounding much more alert than he had a second earlier. “I was just watching something on Netflix. What's up? Are you okay?”

Wilbur should tell him he was fine. He should apologize for calling and hang up because he didn't need to burden Tommy with this shit. Tommy was a kid. He didn't need his twenty-three year old friend complaining to him about his problems.

But he was also Tommy. *Wilbur's* Tommy. If Wilbur hung up, there wasn't anyone else he'd be able to call. And the idea of being stuck in silence with his own thoughts right now was unbearable.

“Can you just-” his breathing hitched, and he took a beat to compose himself. “Can you just talk to me? About random shit? Tell me about what you were watching or whatever?” He paused. Then, “the TV station is really loud right now,” he whispered.

Tommy made a noise of understanding.

“Well, if you must know, I'm watching a documentary about penguins, right?”

And just like that, without asking a single question, Tommy dove into a long tangent about the different penguins in the documentary he had on. Wilbur listened to Tommy recount the drama between the mating pairs, laughed as Tommy talked about how much of a bitch this one penguin was because he kept stealing rocks from the other penguins, and slowly the pressure on his chest began to lift.

It was a distraction. But Wilbur welcomed it with open arms.



Nothing came of Wilbur's talk with Techno. The morning after it happened, he half-expected to be pulled into a family meeting where Phil would go on and on about how worried he was while Techno would refuse to meet his eyes.

But he didn't. Phil smiled at him like he did every morning as he poured Wilbur a cup of coffee. Techno kept his eyes focused on the book in his lap, and didn't say anything to Wilbur.

It wasn't an angry silence. An angry silence Wilbur could deal with. An angry silence was something to stew in, something to sneer at and push against.

This was something else. It was... defeated. Like Techno had given up. He wasn't ignoring Wilbur because he was angry at him. He was ignoring Wilbur because he didn't know what else to do.

Wilbur wished he could say this made him upset. But truthfully, he didn't know what he wanted Techno to do here either. So in a way, the silence was a relief. It allowed him to hide from what had happened the night before, to distract himself like he always did as he got ready for work later that day.

At the bookstore, Wilbur tried not to think about Techno. He stocked shelves, he recommended books to customers, and he joked around with Tommy when the customers began to wane. But it sat in his mind, like a dark cloud looming above him. He had finally put his feelings into words, and it felt anything but relieving.

That day after work ended, Wilbur once again asked Tommy if he wanted to go get dinner. Of course he said yes.

It wasn't long before Wilbur found himself lying on the roof of his car, Tommy right beside him, and a container of take out sitting between them. He had driven to a nearby park, and although the city lights made it difficult to see the stars, he could still make a few out twinkling against the canvas of black.

His mind drifted back to Techno. To the defeated look he had in his eyes Wilbur saw in the split second they made eye contact over breakfast. How *empty* it was. The memory alone was enough to open up a black hole in his stomach, one that he hoped would swallow him whole so he didn't have to think about it anymore.

"Wilbur? Are you listening?"

Blinking out of his thoughts, Wilbur startled when he realized that he'd zoned out while Tommy was talking to him.

"Shit, I'm sorry, man. I didn't hear that," Wilbur apologized, grimacing as he turned to look at Tommy. "Can you repeat it? I was a bit lost in my head for a second."

Instead of repeating what he said though, Tommy's brows furrowed. "Are you okay? You seem a bit out of it."

Wilbur shrugged, immediately turning his head to look back up at the stars. “Just... got stuff on my mind.”

He could feel Tommy’s stare boring into the side of his head. “Does it have to do with whatever made you call me last night?”

Shit. Yeah. He’d fallen asleep with Tommy rambling about penguins in his ear, and Tommy hadn’t mentioned it today outside of asking if he’d slept alright.

“Um... yeah, it does,” Wilbur admitted.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

While a part of Wilbur wanted to say yeah, he had already burdened Tommy enough with his shit by calling him the night before. He didn’t need to vent to him about his complicated relationship with his brother.

“It’s fine, I don’t wanna bug you with that shit.”

Somehow, he felt the stare on his head grow more intense. “It’s not bugging me. If you wanna talk, I don’t mind.”

Wilbur knew he shouldn’t but-

He was still pissed. The entire conversation had left a bad taste in his mouth, both from what he had said to Techno, but also what Techno had said to him. The fact that he was judging Wilbur for having a new friend? Accusing him of avoiding his problems just because he didn’t want to explain to his other friends why he’d dropped out of his college classes? Techno wasn’t his therapist. He didn’t need his older brother making him feel guilty for hanging out with Tommy.

“My brother and I had a talk last night,” Wilbur began, the words spilling from his lips like water from a faucet. “He basically, uh, doesn’t like that I’ve been hanging out a lot with you lately because he thinks I’m avoiding my problems.”

“Wait, he’s mad you’re hanging out with me?” Tommy asked, frowning at him.

“It’s not you specifically, he just thinks that I’m hanging out with you to try and avoid my shit,” Wilbur clarified. “It just pisses me off how he thinks he acts like he knows me so well and can just tell me what I’m doing wrong in my life. He doesn’t know anything about what I’m doing, and he has no right to accuse me of avoiding my issues like that!” Groaning, Wilbur dragged his hands down his face. “I wish he’d just fuck off and let me deal with this on my own.”

Tommy was silent, not responding immediately after Wilbur stopped talking.

He wasn’t sure what he was expecting Tommy to say. Maybe just an, “I’m sorry you have to deal with that” type of thing? Maybe he’d give some advice for how to get his brother to leave him alone?

Instead, Tommy said the absolute last thing Wilbur expected to hear.

“...you’re a self-pitying asshole sometimes, you know that, right?”

Wilbur blinked, wondering if he’d heard Tommy right.

“What?”

Sitting up so he was resting on his elbows, Tommy scowled at Wilbur. “I said you’re a self-pitying asshole. Here you are, complaining to me because your brother fucking cares about you and is trying to help you. Sure, he might not have the right idea, but he clearly gives a shit about you and you want him to fuck off.”

“Wh- I thought you’d be on my side with this!” Wilbur protested, sitting upright and gaping at Tommy.

“I’m not on a fucking side here, Wilbur!” Tommy hissed, fully sitting upright as well. “I’m just pointing out how much of a privileged asshole you’re being right now. You have a brother that cares about you enough to try and point out something you’re doing that’s worrying him. Do you know how many people don’t have anyone that cares about them like that? How many people *wish* they had someone that cared like that?”

Tommy’s eyes were burning with righteous fury in the dim light of the moon, and it was then Wilbur remembered Tommy’s living situation.

“I- Well, of course I get that but-”

“No, you don’t get it,” Tommy snapped, cutting him off. “You are so fucking blind to how lucky you are, Wilbur. You have a dad and a brother that love you, you can afford to go to college and you can afford to take time off, you don’t even need your job at the bookstore because your dad is paying for everything for you—and yet you complain about it all the time! Do you know how fucking frustrating it is for me to sit and listen to you bitch about having a brother that cares about you when I would’ve given anything to have someone give that much of a shit about me?”

Anxiety buzzed in Wilbur’s chest like a swarm of bees had taken residence in his lungs. Tommy was right. Tommy was completely right. Wilbur was selfish. Here he was, complaining about Techno trying to help him when Tommy’s parents never gave a shit about him. Tommy had to go home to a cold, empty apartment every night, while Wilbur had a warm house with his father and his brother always there to greet him when he got home.

Fuck. Tommy was right. Wilbur was selfish. He was so goddamn selfish. And now Tommy was going to hate him because he realized just how selfish Wilbur was, and Wilbur was going to lose the only friend he had anymore, and he was still being selfish because that’s what he was worried about instead of how Tommy didn’t deserve a shitty friend like him.

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur choked out, that iron band wrapping around his chest again as he fought to breathe. “I’m sorry that- that was shitty of me. Fuck, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have- you shouldn’t have to listen to me bitch about that. You’re right, it’s stupid and I’m just an asshole



who doesn't realize how good he's got it-" his breathing hitched, and he could feel the panic rising inside of him.

Shit. Fuck. Not now. He couldn't have a panic attack now. That would just be making it all about him again. He couldn't do this right now. He had to stop being selfish for once in his fucking life.

But Tommy was pissed at him. Tommy probably hated him now. It was only a matter of time before Tommy realized how horrible he was to be around. How pathetic he truly was. Wilbur couldn't even get one fucking friendship right these days, that's how broken he was.

Tommy must've noticed Wilbur's rising panic, because as Wilbur struggled to control his breathing, Tommy crawled across the roof until he was crouched right in front of Wilbur.

"Hey, Wilbur, it's okay. I'm not pissed at you," Tommy said, the sharp edge having disappeared from his voice.

Burying his face in his hands, Wilbur shook his head. "You are. You should be. I'm a fucking prick."

"No, you're not," Tommy said, grabbing his wrists and tugging his hands away from his face, "just take a second to chill out and breathe, okay?"

"I'm fine," Wilbur said, although the panic was still bubbling inside of him.

Tommy raised an eyebrow at him in obvious disbelief. Wilbur huffed and dropped his head.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't get so upset over something so stupid," he muttered.

"Don't worry about that right now. Just take a second to chill the fuck out and breathe with me," Tommy instructed. He kept his hands on Wilbur's wrist, squeezing tightly as he took an exaggerated breath in, and another exaggerated breath out.

Wilbur followed his lead as best he could. The rising panic inside of him began to ebb away, and Wilbur let out a sigh of relief when he realized he wasn't going to have to deal with a full panic attack in front of Tommy.

They did this for a few minutes. Wilbur focused on the sound of Tommy's breathing and tried to match his own to it, and also pinpointed his attention on the warm hands on his wrists. Finally, the iron band lifted itself off of Wilbur's chest, and he tugged his hands back from Tommy to run his hands through his hair.

"Fuck," he muttered, twisting his fingers in his hair. "I'm sorry. You shouldn't have had to deal with that."

"You don't need to apologize, man," Tommy reassured him, shifting so he was sitting next to Wilbur instead of in front of him. "I didn't- my words didn't come out right. I sounded way more pissed than I meant to be."

“You were right though,” Wilbur said, pulling his knees up to his chest. “I am a self-pitying asshole.”

Tommy shook his head. “You kind of are, but not in the way I said it. Yeah, you have a lot of things I didn’t get to have, but that doesn’t mean you can’t have your own problems.”

Pausing, he took a breath to steady himself. “My parents used to say that shit to me. Whenever I tried to point out how they never seemed to care about what I was doing or anything, they would tell me I was lucky to have food and clothes and all that since not all kids have that, so I shouldn’t be complaining. I hated when they did that, and I just did the same thing to you.”

“Hey, Tommy, it’s okay,” Wilbur said, nudging Tommy’s shoulder with his own. “You made a fair point.”

Huffing, Tommy slumped against Wilbur’s side. “Your problems still matter though, Wil. Just because I’m jealous or whatever doesn’t mean I should make you feel like shit for needing to rant to me.”

Now *that* took Wilbur out of his anxiety-ridden thoughts.

“Wait, are you jealous of me?”

Tommy was pointedly not looking at him as he shrugged. “I thought it was obvious. I know it’s stupid, because you have your own problems to deal with and your life definitely isn’t perfect or anything, but I just- I dunno, like I said, it’s stupid.”

Frowning, Wilbur grabbed Tommy’s shoulders and turned him so he was facing him. “That’s not stupid, Tommy.”

Blinking rapidly, Tommy shook his head and still tried to avoid Wilbur’s eyes. “It is stupid. It’s just me wanting shit I can’t have.”

Grabbing Tommy’s chin, Wilbur lifted his head until Tommy’s eyes reluctantly met his. “What do you mean by shit you can’t have?”

Clenching his jaw, Tommy tried to pull away, but Wilbur wouldn’t let him. His breathing was picking up speed now, and Wilbur could see tears glittering in his eyes. “Are you really gonna make me fucking say it?”

Wilbur was silent, and didn’t let go. Tommy stared him down for a few beats, before he squeezed his eyes shut.

“I just- I want someone to *care*, okay?!” He admitted, his voice cracking. “I want someone to care about me the way your family seems to care about you. I want someone to notice if I’m struggling and ask if I’m okay, I want someone to look at me and decide they give a shit what happens to me, but if my own parents couldn’t do that then why should I expect anyone else to?”

With that, he ripped his chin out of Wilbur's grip, and buried his face in his hands as his shoulders began to shake.

Wilbur stared at Tommy's trembling form, wondering why it felt like the black hole in his stomach had just swallowed his heart.

"Tommy-"

"I'm fine," Tommy said, his voice thick with tears and muffled by the hands on his face. "I'm- I'm fine, I promise. I should- I should be used to this. I've been alone for basically my whole life. I should know how to do it by now."

And with that, a simple revelation lit up in Wilbur's mind. A tiny dot of light in the black hole that was creating a cavern in his chest.

"You're not alone," Wilbur said quietly. "You have me."

Tommy stiffened, but let his hands drop from his face. "You don't have to say that to make me feel better, y'know."

"I'm not just saying it," Wilbur insisted. "You said you want someone to look at you and decide they give a shit about you? Well, I give a shit about you. You're my best friend, Tommy. You've already helped me more than I think you even realize, and I want you to be able to rely on me in the same way."

"...really?" His voice was so small, Wilbur almost didn't hear it.

"Really."

Tommy stared at him for a moment in silence, as if he was debating whether or not to believe him.

"But why? I'm not- I'm not a nice person. I told you that night in the restaurant. I'm loud, annoying, and- and-"

"And *I'm* a self-pitying asshole. I'm also selfish as hell and I make everything about myself," Wilbur said, cutting him off. "Why do you care about me enough to tell me about your penguin documentary when I call you late at night out of the blue? Why do you care enough to make up an excuse about having a curfew because you can tell I'm uncomfortable in a conversation?"

"Because... you're *you*, dumbass," Tommy answered immediately, as if that was a full answer in itself.

And strangely enough, Wilbur understood exactly what he meant.

"Then there's your answer."

Tommy's eyes widened with understanding.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh’. This works both ways. We’re in this together, okay?” Wilbur said, stretching out a hand between them.

There was a beat of silence as Tommy stared at the offered hand. He glanced between Wilbur’s palm and his face, something conflicted flashing over his expression.

Then, he placed his hand in Wilbur’s, and Wilbur squeezed his fingers.

“Okay. Together,” Tommy echoed, squeezing Wilbur’s hand back.

Despite the rollercoaster of emotions that was that night, Wilbur found himself beaming at Tommy, and Tommy’s smile matched his perfectly.

## Chapter End Notes

crimeboys,,, crime,, c aaaaa

also twinsduo angst my beloved... the brothers are having a TIME because wilbur won't deal with his problems rip, but at least he's got tommy!

hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! next chapter is probably my favorite of the entire thing so look forward to that! again, make sure to subscribe, I'm posting one chapter of this every other day <3

I have a playlist for this fic so check it out [here](#)

please let me know what you thought down in the comments below! i don't reply to most but I read all of them and they really make my day <333

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# in a matter of speaking i'm dead

## Chapter Summary

If Wilbur is a dam, the emotional floodgates are about to burst.

## Chapter Notes

hi hi everyone we are nearing the end of this fic!

thank you all so so much for the kind comments on the last chapter, I'm so glad you guys are enjoying the dialogue and characterization as I had so much fun with writing it for this fic

anyway, this is probably my favorite chapter out of all of them, so I really hope you guys enjoy it

TWs for this chapter: detailed description of a bad panic attack and anxiety spiraling, talk of suicide

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

More time passed. Techno didn't bring up the conversation with Wilbur again. Meanwhile, Wilbur continued ignoring his friends texts, and spent nearly all of his free time with Tommy. He could tell Techno wasn't thrilled about this, while Phil seemed determined to only look at things in a positive way.

Wilbur didn't care what they thought. He wasn't avoiding his problems. He'd only just gotten settled into his routine with the bookstore. These things took time, right? That was the entire point of getting pulled out of his classes. So he could take time to get himself together.

Apparently Wilbur had less time than he thought.

It was one of the rare nights Wilbur was having dinner with Phil and Techno instead of going out with Tommy. Silverware softly clinked against porcelain as Wilbur worked through his stir fry, the taste of soy sauce sitting heavily on his tongue since he'd accidentally put too much on his food.

"So Wil," Phil spoke up out of the blue, startling Wilbur out of his internal complaints about the soy sauce. "I had a question I wanted to ask you."

Wilbur clenched his jaw. That was never a good sign. “What is it?” He asked, setting down his fork.

Phil gave him an awkward smile. One that told Wilbur this wasn’t going to be something he wanted to hear. “Well, I’ve just noticed how you seem to be doing a bit better lately. You’ve stabilized a bit, you’re not taking your anxiety pills as much, you’re going out with friends again—and I heard that enrollment for next quarter is opening in a few days. So I was wondering if you were interested at all in going back to your classes yet?”

Beside Phil, Techno tightened his grip around his fork, but didn’t say anything.

Meanwhile, Wilbur... Wilbur was supposed to be happy.

This was what he had wanted this entire time. Ever since he got pulled out of his classes, all he’d wanted was the chance to go back and finish his degree. Now Phil was saying he could enroll again, he could go back to what he was supposed to be doing this entire time.

Wilbur should be happy. Thrilled, even.

Instead, he couldn’t breathe.

His heart pounded in his ears as he fought to pull air into his lungs. This- This was a good thing. It was supposed to be a good thing. Going back to classes. Seeing his friends again without having to lie to them. Writing essays. Reading textbooks. Reading pages upon pages of things he had zero interest in. Wondering what he was doing with his life. Having emotional breakdowns over essays. Second-guessing every choice he’d made up until that point-

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Why the hell wasn’t he happy about this? Why did it feel like he’d just had a bucket of ice cold water dunked on his head?

“Wilbur?” Phil said after a few beats of silence. “You haven’t said anything yet.”

Wilbur needed to smile. Needed to tell Phil he’d love to enroll again.

He couldn’t open his mouth. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t fucking *breathe*.

Pouring over essay after essay well into the night, until the sun crept up over the horizon. Reading page after page of pointless text until his eyes were practically burning a hole through his skull. Feeling trapped. Trapped in his classes, trapped in his major, trapped in all the expectations weighing down down down-

“I- I-” Wilbur struggled to spit the words out. “I need- I don’t- I want to but-” he cut himself off with a shaky breath, and brought his hands up to twist his fingers into his hair.

“Hey, Wil, it’s okay,” Phil quickly said, reaching across the table. “You don’t need to go back to classes yet. It was just an idea. There’s no pressure on you at all.”

“I- I want to go back,” Wilbur stammered, although it sounded like a lie even to his own ears. “I should want to go back.”

There was a scraping sound as Techno got out of his chair, placing his hands on the table next to Wilbur. “Hey, Wil, you don’t have to go back to classes yet. Just try to breathe.”

“I need to go back,” Wilbur whispered, pulling harder at his hair. “I need to go back. I- I *need* to go back.”

“No, you don’t.”

There were more footsteps as Phil ran to the other side of Wilbur. “Wilbur, c’mon, I just need you to breathe for me.”

The two voices on either side of his head kept telling him different things. Techno reassuring him he didn’t have to go back to classes, Phil trying to get him to breathe. It was too loud. Too much. Wilbur couldn’t focus on their voices above the noise in his head. It was completely overwhelming.

“Shut up!” Wilbur shouted after a few minutes. “For the love of god please shut the fuck up!”

Both Phil and Techno fell silent. All Wilbur could hear now were his stuttering breaths, and the racing of his own heart echoing in his ears.

Why the hell was he reacting like this? Wilbur wanted to go back to classes. It was what he wanted this whole time.

But did he really? Did he want to go back to the essays, the lectures, the mind-numbing assignments, the feeling of trapping himself into a career he didn’t want?

He didn’t know. He didn’t know anymore. His head was far too loud, screaming in his ears about the things he knew he should want and the rising anxiety over the realization that he didn’t want any of that at all.

Phil and Techno were both looming over him. He could hear their breathing as well as his own. He could feel their stares boring into his head. They could see he was broken. Not ready for this at all. Not like Phil thought he was.

Once again, he was a disappointment.

The stares prickled on his skin like electricity. Without thinking, Wilbur stumbled to his feet, shoving Phil out of the way as he rushed away from the dining room.

“Wilbur! What are you doing?” Phil called out behind him.

Wilbur didn’t bother to reply. He needed to not be in there. He had to get away from their eyes. From their silent judgement. The way he could feel it weighing down on him like someone was shoving a pillow over his face and waiting for him to suffocate.

Stumbling to his room, Wilbur slammed the door behind him and started to pace. Nervous energy hummed through his veins as he walked back and forth, curling his fingers in and out of fists and tugging at the ends of his sweater sleeves just to try and do *something*.

He was a disappointment. He was a fuck up. He was pathetic. He needed to enroll in his fucking classes.

His head was too loud. It was too loud and Wilbur couldn't figure out how to get it to shut the fuck up.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to him. Digging into his pocket, Wilbur pulled out his phone and didn't even have to look for the contact to dial.

Tommy picked up on the third ring. "Wil?"

"Tommy," Wilbur said, sounding breathless despite the fact that he was just pacing back and forth in his room. "Can- Can I come over? Can I drive over there?"

"Wh- right now?" Tommy asked, sounding confused.

"Yeah, right now," Wilbur repeated, nodding to himself as he twisted his free hand into the fabric of his sweater. "We can go to the diner or to the park or get fast food or just- I- I need to get out of the house right now. Can we do that?"

There was a shuffling sound on the other end. "Uh, yeah, sure. But are you okay, Wilbur?"

"Honestly? Not doing too great right now, which is why I need to get out of my house," Wilbur said, looping around his room again. "So I can drive over?"

"Yeah, you can. But do you wanna stay on the phone while you drive?"

Wilbur shook his head, even though Tommy couldn't see him over the call. "No, I'll call you when I get there."

Then, before Tommy could say anything else, Wilbur hung up. He tried to take a deep breath to steady himself, but couldn't manage to fill up his lungs enough to get any satisfaction out of it.

It was fine. He was fine. He would be fine. All he had to do was get out of the house.

Pulling a sweatshirt over his head, Wilbur grabbed his car keys and swung open the door to his room. He headed down the hallway and back into the main foyer, where Phil and Techno were standing with their heads bowed in quiet conversation.

Both of them stiffened when they heard Wilbur's footsteps. Phil rushed to his side, while Techno hung back, watching him with a crease between his brows.

"Why are there keys in your hand?" Techno asked, gaze flickering down to Wilbur's side.

"I'm going out," Wilbur said, staring his brother down and forcing himself not to flinch away.

Phil frowned. "Where are you going?"

His grip on the keys tightened. "Out."



“Where is ‘out’?” Techno pushed, folding his arms over his chest.

Wilbur didn’t want to say he was going to Tommy’s, because he knew that would just open Techno to pointing out again how he was spending too much time with him. He didn’t want to give his brother that opening. He didn’t want to see the judgement flash through his dark gaze.

“I don’t need to tell you where I’m going,” Wilbur said instead, the band tightening around his chest.

The pillow on his face was pressed down harder. The voices around him were too loud. Too much.

“Wil, c’mom-”

Wilbur recoiled when Phil put his hand on his shoulder, the simple touch sending an electric shock through his system. Phil immediately yanked his hand back at Wilbur’s violent reaction, and Wilbur pretended like he didn’t see the hurt flash through his father’s eyes.

“I’m not gonna go jump off a bridge or anything, I just need to be left the fuck alone,” Wilbur snapped, glaring at both his father and his brother. Then, before either of them could argue, he threw open the front door. “I’ll be back later.”

With that, he slammed the door behind him hard enough to shake the wall. He winced at the *boom!* that echoed down the street, but didn’t let himself dwell on it as he hurried to his car.

The drive to Tommy’s apartment was agonizing. Wilbur thought the drive would help calm him down. Clear his mind and quiet his spinning thoughts. But it didn’t. In fact, it was a bit of the opposite. The silence in the car was even more suffocating than his family’s smothering voices.

Here he was again, overreacting to a simple goddamn question. This entire episode was uncalled for. Wilbur needed to go back to classes. This panic was stupid, and he needed to find a way to get it to shut off.

The iron band grew tighter the longer he drove. His hands were shaking as they clutched the steering wheel for dear life, and his vision started to blur as he drove down the empty roads. He was fine. He was *fine*. Going back to classes was a great idea. It was great and he wasn’t going to panic about it because there was no reason for him to panic over that. He was being ridiculous.

*The lingering taste of vodka burnt the back of his throat. His heart was pounding in his ears far too loud far too fast far too too too much-*

*His head was spinning, and his breath was coming out as a rattling wheeze. Black dots danced across his vision, and Wilbur tried to get up to get to his door but he tripped over a book on the floor.*

*Slamming into the ground, Wilbur's vision spun as he fought to take another breath. Everything was going black. He was going to die like this.*

Shaking his head to try and get out of the memory, Wilbur blinked as he focused back on the road. He was almost at Tommy's place now. It would be fine. He would be fine. He just needed a distraction. He couldn't be alone with his thoughts like this.

Wilbur pulled up in front of the familiar apartment building. He put the car in park in front of the door, and his hands trembled so violently, it took him several tries to hit Tommy's contact on his phone again.

"Wil?"

"I'm outside your building," Wilbur said, having to force the words out of his throat.

"Um, okay. I'll be right down."

Tommy hung up again, and Wilbur dropped the phone into his lap. He was fine. He had to compose himself before Tommy got down here. Tommy shouldn't have to deal with him like this.

Fuck, why did he come here in the first place? Why the hell was he putting this stuff on Tommy when he had plenty of shit to deal with on his own? This wasn't fair to him.

Again, Wilbur was selfish. He was selfish and he burdened others and he couldn't even take fucking college classes without having a mental breakdown. Phil and Techno were probably worried sick about him and he couldn't even bring himself to care. All he could think about was himself. How he couldn't breathe. Everything was spinning. His head was too loud so fucking loud it was driving him nuts that he couldn't turn the fucking TV station off in his mind-

The car door opening on his right startled him out of his thoughts. Snapping his head over, he saw Tommy climbing into the passenger's seat.

"Hey Wil," Tommy said softly, shutting the door behind him. "So what's the plan? What are we doing?"

Tommy was here. Tommy was here and he was staring at Wilbur with eyes as wide as saucers. Wilbur could feel the way his gaze raked over him, taking in the tense line of his shoulders, the rapid way his chest was moving up and down, how his knuckles were white where they gripped the steering wheel. Tommy could see it all.

"I was- I was thinking maybe we could-" his breathing hitched, and he winced as he tried to figure out his words. "We could go, um, to the diner? Or maybe- maybe to the park? We could get fast food or just- we could go somewhere, right?" Tommy stared at him in silence, face twisting into something worried, and Wilbur felt his heart rate pick up. "The diner sounds good, right? Just like- like that night we ran into each other there? How about that?"

Wilbur wasn't thinking about what he was saying. The words were spilling from his lips unbidden, his thoughts racing around his mind too fast for him to make any real sense of them. He had to fill the silence. He had to fill it before Tommy could, because he could tell by the way Tommy was looking at him that he knew Wilbur was unraveling right in front of him.

"Wilbur, what's going on?"

"The soondubu place might still be open!" Wilbur continued without acknowledging Tommy's question. "Maybe- Maybe you could try the medium spice and we could try to get you used to spicy stuff. Once you like spicy stuff that opens up a whole new world of food-"

"Wilbur-"

"Or we could just go to the park and look at the stars again- wait, maybe the music room is open! We could go play the guitar and maybe just fuck around for a few hours-"

"Wilbur!"

Tommy's shout cut Wilbur's rambling off immediately, and Wilbur flinched when he saw the fear painted across Tommy's face as plain as day.

"Wilbur," Tommy said again, leaning over the center console. "What the fuck is going on? What happened?"

Taking another shaky breath, Wilbur turned away from Tommy's searching eyes and focused on the steering wheel. "Nothing's going on."

"Something is clearly going on."

Wilbur shook his head. "I'm- I'm fine."

Tommy narrowed his eyes. "You're clearly not. You're rambling like a madman and look like you're two seconds away from jumping out of your own skin."

"I'm *fine*, Tommy!" Wilbur snapped, trying to put as much force into his voice as he could.

This didn't seem to phase Tommy at all. "I'm not an idiot. Something happened so what the hell was it?"

It was stupid. It was so fucking stupid Wilbur didn't want to tell him. Didn't want Tommy to know how easy it was to make him shatter into a thousand tiny pieces.

"I'm fine," he whispered, wincing when his voice cracked.

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"You're not."

“I am.”

“For fuck’s sake, you’re not fine so stop pretending like you are!” Tommy shouted. “I’m not going anywhere with you until you tell me what the fuck is going on, so either start talking or I’m getting out of the car!”

And that was when Wilbur realized that Tommy was afraid of him.

His blue eyes were wide with fear as they looked between Wilbur’s hands and the road. He was afraid to be in the car with him. He was scared of what Wilbur might do if he started driving.

Wilbur couldn’t do anything right. He scared his best friend, he scared his dad and brother—all because he was so fucking pathetic he couldn’t answer a single question about if he wanted to enroll in his college classes again or not.

And that realization—that Tommy was afraid of him right now—that was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Hot tears poured down his cheeks as a keening whine broke out from his chest with violent force. The iron band was crushing his lungs as he gasped for air, and couldn’t feel even the slightest measure of relief from it.

He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe and he couldn’t think and all he wanted was for everything to shut off. For the noise to stop in his head for one fucking second but it couldn’t, it couldn’t stop because there was no off button and it was just too loud.

Wilbur yanked on his hair as he curled in on himself, the panic washing over him in one fell swoop. Another strangled sound tore from his throat without his permission, and all he wanted to do was fucking breathe- please just let him take a fucking full breath without this iron band suffocating him-

Suddenly, there was movement in the corner of his eye as Tommy unbuckled his seatbelt and shifted until he was half sitting on the center console.

“Wilbur, Wilbur I need you to breathe for me,” Tommy was saying, and Wilbur was barely processing what he was saying.

He could still taste the vodka on his tongue. It was there and it was heavy and it *burned*. It burned in a way that promised relief but also pain and fucking hell why was everything so goddamn loud?

There was something pulling on his fingers. Wilbur’s hand was so tightly twisted in his hair it was making his scalp throb, but Tommy tugged on his hand until he loosened his grip for just a moment.

Tommy tangled their fingers together and squeezed Wilbur’s hand surprisingly hard. “I’m holding your hand, Wil. Can you feel that? Focus on that.”

He could feel it. He could feel the calluses on Tommy's palms and the death grip he was squeezing his fingers with. It almost hurt but it was a good kind of pain. One that distracted him from the screaming in his head.

"I know the TV station is probably really fucking loud right now but you need to try and ignore it," Tommy continued, squeezing his hand every few seconds. "Listen to me instead. Listen to my voice. Try to take a deep breath for me."

Wilbur tried- he really tried, but it was a pathetic attempt where he could barely inhale for a few seconds before his lungs protested. But Tommy didn't comment on it. He just told Wilbur to try again, and they kept at it.

The vodka still burned his throat and his head was spinning the longer he struggled with breathing, but Tommy kept at it. He did his best to focus on his voice, breathing in and out when he told him to. He focused on the hand still painfully squeezing his, and squeezed Tommy's hand back just as hard.

It took far longer than Wilbur was used to for his panic to ebb away. But he tried not to think about how long it was taking, and instead kept his full focus on Tommy. On Tommy's instructions to breathe, on the hand squeezing his own, on the blur of blonde hair he could barely make out through his tear-filled eyes.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the iron band around his chest lifted. He gasped for air, the suffocating sensation dissipating like a dark cloud. Tommy's grip on his hand loosened, and Wilbur squeezed his fingers one more time before letting go.

His eyes were swollen and his throat was raw. Even though the panic had gone away, his head now felt like it was stuffed with cotton, and he blinked several times as he tried to gather his thoughts.

Glancing up, Wilbur met Tommy's eyes again.

"You back with me, Wil?" Tommy asked, eyebrows furrowing.

Wilbur nodded, not trusting his voice to work properly after all of that.

Tommy's shoulders dropped as he let out a deep sigh of relief. "Thank fucking god," he muttered, shifting so he was sitting fully back in the passenger's seat. "Do you get panic attacks that bad a lot?"

No. That had to have been one of the worst panic attacks he'd had in a long time.

Wilbur shook his head, and Tommy let out another sigh. It was quiet for a moment, the only sounds in the car being Wilbur's still labored breathing, and Tommy's shuffling against the car seat.

Then, Tommy was leaning over, and before Wilbur could wonder what he was doing, he was twisting the key in the ignition to shut the car off. Wilbur had forgotten it was still running, and the engine rumbling under his seat immediately fell silent.

Taking the key in his hand, Tommy opened the passenger door to the car and gave Wilbur a pointed look. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting you drive anywhere after that, so we’re gonna go up to my place, got it?”

Even if Wilbur wanted to argue, he knew he wouldn’t have been able to. But the idea of getting out of the car and just sitting on a couch to take a breather sounded like heaven to Wilbur right then.

Wilbur’s limbs were stiff as he clambered out of the driver’s seat. It was like he was a wooden doll that had forgotten how to move, his limbs still humming with lingering adrenaline from the panic attack. Tommy locked the car with the keys, and looped his arm through Wilbur’s to lead him inside the apartment building.

Even though he and Tommy had hung out a frankly ridiculous number of times at this point, Wilbur realized he’d never actually been inside Tommy’s apartment until now. The lobby was dim, with a narrow staircase and a rickety-looking elevator that set Wilbur’s nerves on end just looking at it.

No one was around as Tommy pressed the elevator button and they waited for the car to come down. Wilbur kept his eyes on the ground anyway, not wanting his bloodshot gaze to be visible if anyone passed by them.

The elevator dinged as the doors slid open, and it was blessedly empty. Tommy dragged Wilbur inside, pressing the button for the fourth floor without a word. The elevator shuddered as it rode up, and Wilbur sucked in another greedy gulp of air to steady himself.

Once the door opened, Wilbur was faced with a plain beige hallway lined with identical dark doors. Tommy led him past the doors until stopping in front of one that didn’t look any different from all the others. He took his arm out of Wilbur’s as he dug in his pocket for his keys, and the door creaked loudly as Tommy pushed it open.

Tommy’s apartment was tiny. Wilbur could’ve guessed this since he was a seventeen year old living off of a retail salary, but it was still a shock to see just how small his place was. The living room and kitchen were practically the same room, with a single door off to the side that Wilbur presumed led to the bedroom.

The walls were stained and the couch was a sad, sagging thing. Tommy dragged Wilbur over to it, pressing him down by the shoulders until he sat. Then, he headed over to the kitchen, and Wilbur stared at an empty spot on the wall where he imagined a TV was supposed to go, but there was no TV to be found.

There was the sound of a refrigerator door opening to his right. When Tommy walked back over, he shoved a cold water bottle in Wilbur’s hands.

“Drink that,” he ordered.

Then, Tommy settled himself down on the couch next to Wilbur, picking a beat-up looking laptop off the cushion and opening the lid. The light of the screen made Wilbur cringe, and Tommy quickly turned the brightness down to a tolerable level.

He set the laptop on the scratched up coffee table in front of the couch. Wilbur saw Netflix was already open, and Tommy scrolled through the options for a moment before clicking on some nature documentary with a cheetah on the cover.

As the documentary started up, a woman's voice narrating the circle of life in the African Savannah, he felt Tommy nudge his side.

"Drink the water," Tommy said, pointing to the bottle still clutched between his hands.

Oh. Right.

Twisting off the cap, Wilbur took a long swig of the cool water, slumping back against the cushions as it soothed his raw throat. While he did that, he felt something warm fall on his lap, and saw that Tommy had thrown a blanket over both of them to share.

Neither of them said anything for a long while. Wilbur wasn't sure what he was even supposed to say. He was horribly embarrassed that he'd had a panic attack *that* bad in front of Tommy. That was the kind of thing he wouldn't even want Phil to see, let alone his best friend. Tommy probably had a million questions swirling in his mind right now, but he wasn't asking any of them. He was just sitting in silence, watching the documentary on his shitty laptop screen, patiently waiting for Wilbur to finish his water.

Wilbur was exhausted. Both physically and mentally. There was no more panic buzzing in his chest, but there wasn't much else either. It was as if he'd been hollowed out. Turned into a shell as he thought over everything that had just happened.

It was obvious in retrospect that whatever... *that* was, it had been building for a long time. Every little question about his classes, every time he wondered what he was going to do with his life, each small moment had stacked up and up inside of himself until it had all come pouring out in one ugly flood.

Unfortunately, Tommy had been the one to get caught up in the floodwater. While a part of Wilbur felt guilty for that, he also couldn't help but be so grateful that it had been Tommy who pulled him out of that. If he had been with Phil or Techno when that dam burst, it probably would've taken much longer for him to swim up to the surface of his panic.

The documentary played on. Wilbur wasn't paying attention as he thought about the lingering taste of vodka, or how his chest kept clenching every time he even thought of the word 'classes'.

After he finished the water, he put the empty plastic bottle on the coffee table. He tried to slump back against the couch again, to relax and try to focus on the movie, but he couldn't. His fingers were twitching, and although it wasn't the same anxious energy as before, there was still a restlessness he couldn't name humming through his veins.

He needed a cigarette.

Glancing to the left, Wilbur noticed Tommy's window opened up onto a fire escape.

“I’m gonna go have a smoke,” he announced nearly thirty minutes into the documentary, wincing at how hoarse he sounded.

Tommy frowned, but didn’t say anything as Wilbur got off the couch and headed to the window. He unlatched it with ease, climbing out onto the fire escape, the metal rattling under his shoes. Cool air washed over him, and he took a much steadier breath than he’d taken all night as he sat in front of the railing, his legs dangling over the side while he dug in his pocket for his cigarettes.

As he was lighting it, he heard the fire escape rattle again. Tommy sat down next to Wilbur, resting his arms over the railing and scrunching his nose up at the cigarette smoke.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Wilbur said, the smoke burning the back of his still-raw throat.

“You don’t need to apologize for having a panic attack, man,” Tommy told him with a frown. “Why the hell would you need to apologize for that?”

Wilbur shrugged, grey smoke curling from his lips. “I don’t know. You had to calm me down from that and that couldn’t have been fun.”

Tommy huffed. “So? That’s how it works. You give a shit about me, I give a shit about you.”

He knew Tommy had a point, but that didn’t stop the shame from creeping up his chest.

Things fell silent again. Wilbur took another drag, relishing in the burn in his throat. The pain was familiar—soothing, almost.

“Can I ask what happened to cause that?” Tommy then asked.

And that-

Wasn’t that something to try and explain.

Not even Wilbur understood what fully caused that, except that it had been a long time coming. An explosion building behind his eyes for ages. A pressure getting stronger and stronger until everything came pouring out of him in a truly ugly display.

“Over dinner my dad asked me if I wanted to enroll in classes again for the upcoming quarter,” Wilbur finally said, staring out onto the empty city streets below.

Beside him, Tommy shifted. “Isn’t that what you wanted? I thought this whole time you were complaining because your dad wouldn’t let you go back to school?”

Wilbur snorted, and it was a bitter sound. “I thought so too.”

He had thought that was what he wanted. That if he went back to school, everything would go back to normal. That he just had to push through it and he would be fine.



*The lingering taste of vodka burnt the back of his throat. His heart was pounding in his ears far too loud far too fast far too too too much-*

*His head was spinning, and his breath was coming out as a rattling wheeze. Black dots danced across his vision, and Wilbur tried to get up to get to his door but he tripped over a book on the floor.*

*Slamming into the ground, Wilbur's vision spun as he fought to take another breath. Everything was going black. He was going to die like this.*

*It was a relief to realize that. That it was over. That he could finally stop.*

Something solid lodged itself in his throat as he thought back to that night, and finally put a name to the feeling that had washed over him in the last few seconds before he passed out.

He could feel Tommy's eyes watching him. Waiting for him to say more.

So he did.

"I tried to kill myself, you know?"

It was strangely easy to let the words he'd been fighting against for so long slip from his lips. Like the confession had been fighting against the bars of his ribcage, desperate to be released. Desperate for him to acknowledge the truth.

He'd known what he was doing when he took that aspirin. He'd always known. It was just easier to try and pretend that wasn't his intention. To lie to himself so he didn't have to admit how fucked up he really was. So he could keep telling himself he was fine, and almost make himself believe it.

But he wasn't fine. Tonight proved it.

From his left, he heard Tommy make a choked sound.

"Wh- You what?" He asked, his voice small.

"The reason I got pulled out of my classes was because I tried to kill myself and it didn't work," Wilbur explained, a weight lifting off his shoulders. "Downed a bottle of aspirin and chased it with vodka. Definitely could've done without the vodka though, dealing with a hangover after a suicide attempt is *not* a fun time."

Tommy was silent for a moment.

"That's... That's why you got so freaked out when we saw your friends at Pogtopia," Tommy whispered as understanding dawned on him. "They don't know what happened."

"Nah, and I really didn't feel like explaining to them that whole mess." He paused, and turned to meet Tommy's eyes. "You're actually the first person I've outright told about this. Everyone else was either told by someone else, or just doesn't know."

There was another beat of silence as Tommy clenched his jaw, something pained swimming in his eyes as he stared at Wilbur. Then, he was scooting closer, and next thing Wilbur knew Tommy was throwing his arms around him to hug him.

“I’m glad it didn’t work,” Tommy said softly, his voice muffled by Wilbur’s sweater.

And this was where Wilbur was supposed to say he was glad it didn’t work either. Where he was supposed to realize how grateful he was that he’d gotten a second chance.

But... he wasn’t there yet.

In a lot of ways, he was still trapped in his dorm room. With vodka sitting heavily in his stomach, and black dots dancing across his vision. But at least he could admit that now. At least he knew where he was.

So instead of saying anything, Wilbur pressed the cigarette into the metal railing to snuff it out. Then, he turned to hug Tommy properly. Tommy pressed further into his side, and Wilbur rested his chin on Tommy’s head, taking a breath to clear the smoke from his lungs.

They sat like that for several minutes in silence. Tommy seemed to realize what Wilbur’s lack of response meant, because at one point he squeezed Wilbur tighter as a shudder ran down his spine, but he didn’t say anything.

The tranquil quiet was brutally shattered by the sound of Wilbur’s phone ringing.

Tommy pulled back immediately, frowning at Wilbur while Wilbur dug through his pockets for his phone. “Who would be calling you this late at night?”

As soon as Wilbur pulled out his phone, he sighed as he read the contact name blaring on his screen. “My brother,” he muttered, already dreading this conversation.

He had to pick up. Techno and Phil were probably freaking out considering he’d driven off two beats away from a panic attack without telling them where he was going. He owed them at least some kind of explanation.

Pressing the ‘accept call’ button, Wilbur pressed the phone to his ear. “Hey Techno.”

“Oh thank god you’re alright,” Techno breathed out, and guilt twinged in Wilbur’s chest at the obvious worry in his voice. “I’ve been texting you for the past hour. Where are you?”

Ah shit. He definitely hadn’t been paying attention to his phone during that panic attack.

“Sorry, I wasn’t checking my phone. I’m at Tommy’s,” Wilbur said, resting one arm on the railing.

“Of course you are,” Techno muttered, and Wilbur tried not to frown at the disapproval in his tone. “Look, I don’t wanna get into anything tonight. Phil and I are just worried and we wanna know when you’re coming home.”

Wilbur's heart skipped a beat at the idea of having to go home after all of that. Having to face Techno and Phil's worried faces and reassure them that yes, he was fine, and no, he didn't go buy any alcohol. While he knew he needed to talk to them, he was just so exhausted from the past hour that even just the idea of doing that tonight made him want to curl up in a ball and hide.

"When am I coming home?" Wilbur repeated, wincing at how nervous he sounded.

"Yeah, when are-"

Suddenly, the phone was being ripped out of Wilbur's hand, and he frowned as Tommy forced him to let go of the phone and pressed it to his own ear.

"Hey, is this Wilbur's brother?" Tommy asked, eyebrows scrunched together and ignoring Wilbur's confused look. "Yeah, it's Tommy. Who the hell else would he be with?" There was a pause as Techno said something Wilbur couldn't hear. "Well, anyway, to answer your question, he's staying at my place tonight. He'll go home in the morning."

Wilbur hated the relief that swept through him hearing that. He should be able to go home and talk to his dad and brother on his own, but Tommy had been able to see how much he was dreading it, and made the decision for him before he even thought about his options.

"I'm seventeen, why the fuck would I have alcohol in my apartment?" Wilbur winced as Tommy's eyes widened, knowing he was going to get an earful from Techno tomorrow now that he knew Tommy was a teenager. "Uh, yeah, I'm seventeen. Wil didn't tell you?" Tommy glanced at Wilbur, mouthing *you didn't tell him?* before being pulled back to attention by whatever Techno was saying. "Oh fuck off, I'm not a child!"

God, Wilbur could practically feel Techno's exasperation through the phone.

"Wh- I'm not telling you where I live, bitch! He's staying with me tonight and that's that." One more pause, and Tommy rolled his eyes. "Fine, I'll hand the phone back to him."

And then, the phone was being shoved back in Wilbur's face, and Wilbur huffed as he picked it up again.

"You've been hanging out with a seventeen year old this whole time?" Was the first thing Techno said as soon as Wilbur pressed the phone to his ear.

"Yes Techno, Tommy is seventeen, and this is exactly why I didn't want to tell you that," Wilbur said, leaning against the railing.

"Bruh-"

"I'm not getting into it tonight. You can tell me off in the morning or whatever, but I'm fucking exhausted so I'm gonna hang up now."

"Wilbur, wait."

Wilbur paused, his finger hovering over the 'end call' button.

“What?”

“I know we have a lot to talk about tomorrow but I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Blinking, Wilbur stared at the screen, wondering if he’d heard that right.

“I... I’m sorry too,” Wilbur said after a few moments.

Neither one needed to specify what they were apologizing for. They both knew.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Wilbur then added before he got emotional again.

“See you then.”

And with that, Wilbur hung up.

As soon as he put the phone back in his pocket, he let out a deep sigh of relief and tilted his head back to stare at the sky.

“Your brother is kind of a bitch.”

Tommy’s voice startled Wilbur out of his thoughts, and he turned to see Tommy frowning at him.

Wilbur snorted. “That’s fair. He can be a bit prickly sometimes.”

“Also his name is stupid. What the hell kind of a name is Techno?”

“That’s actually just a nickname. His full name is Technoblade,” Wilbur told him, a smirk growing on his face.

Tommy stared at him for a moment in shock. “You’re fucking with me.”

“No, I’m not. Says it on his birth certificate and everything.”

A surprised laugh broke out from Tommy’s chest, and he cackled as he leaned against the railing of the fire escape. “Fucking hell, man!” He laughed for a few more moments, before it gradually died down, his smile fading away as quickly as it came. “He seemed pretty surprised to learn how old I was. Have you just not told your family anything about me?”

Wilbur shrugged. “I just didn’t want Techno to give me shit for my best friend being a teenager. But I don’t really give a shit anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

Reaching out, Wilbur slung an arm around Tommy’s shoulders and tugged him to his side. “I mean I don’t care if people know my best friend is a seventeen year old. If anything, we’re a bit like brothers, which I think is pretty damn cool.”

It was something Wilbur had been thinking for a while, but hadn’t wanted to say for fear of weirding Tommy out. But after tonight, he was too tired to care anymore. Tommy was like

the little brother he never had, and he was so damn lucky for finding him.

“We are like brothers, aren’t we?” Tommy agreed, grinning as he leaned into Wilbur’s side. “Though I’m definitely the cooler one of the two of us.”

Wilbur gasped in fake offense. “Excuse you, child! I’m definitely the cooler one.”

“No way, asshole. I’m way cooler than you. You’re just a lame hipster with stupid glasses,” Tommy teased, grinning at him.

When Wilbur opened his mouth to reply, a loud yawn bubbled up inside of him, and he ended up yawning in Tommy’s face instead.

“This lame hipster is going to fall asleep on you if we don’t go back inside soon,” Wilbur said, a wave of exhaustion hitting him all at once.

Scoffing, Tommy shoved Wilbur’s arm off of him and scrambled to his feet. “Give me five minutes and I’ll get the couch set up for you,” he said as he reached down to help Wilbur up.

Staring at the outstretched hand, Wilbur thought about what getting up would entail. He would go to sleep on Tommy’s couch, and in the morning he would have to drive back home and face Phil and Techno after the mess that was last night.

He owed them both an apology. Because they’d been right this whole time, and he just hadn’t wanted to admit it. He had been running from his problems until he couldn’t run anymore.

Nothing had really changed. But at least he knew where he was now. He figured that was at least a pretty good first step.

Taking Tommy’s hand, he let himself be pulled to his feet.

## Chapter End Notes

HE FINALLY ADMITTED IT... just had to have another emotional breakdown to do it

that scene with wilbur telling tommy he tried to kill himself had been one of the major scenes that got me through writing this entire thing. i just saw it so clearly in my head, and it's such a poignant scene to me... they mean so much

also, I wanna clarify, tommy and wilbur aren't supposed to have the healthiest dynamic in this? in the canon dsmp, c!crimeboys have a somewhat unhealthy codependent relationship, so I tried to translate that here. I just wanna let you guys know i'm aware of that, because while this story is about mental health recovery, it's still based off the characters so not everything with their dynamic is perfect, but it works for them at least. i just. them. crimeboys. <3 love them

I have a playlist for this fic! definitely recommend playing songs like john my beloved or fourth of july off of it while reading this chapter lol because that's what I was doing. check it out [here](#)

please let me know what you thought down in the comments below! I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# did you get enough love, my little dove?

## Chapter Summary

Wilbur has a long overdue talk with Phil and Techno.

## Chapter Notes

hi hi so sorry for the late update, I had a horrible time trying to sleep last night so when I woke up this morning I was super out of it and forgot to post this till now. but finally we have reached the end of vanderlyle! this chapter is more of an epilogue so it's a bit shorter than the rest, but I hope you guys enjoy it anyway!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I’m home!” Wilbur called out into the house.

Almost immediately, Phil poked his head out from the kitchen, a relieved smile blossoming over his face. A flash of guilt panged through Wilbur’s chest at the reminder of how much he’d probably worried his father and his brother the night before, but he didn’t have time to linger on it before Phil was crossing the living room and throwing his arms around him.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Phil said quietly, squeezing him tight.

Wilbur let himself be tugged down so his chin was resting on his dad’s shoulder despite how much he had to hunch over to do that. “I’m sorry I scared you guys.”

“It’s okay, there are a lot of better ways I could’ve handled that conversation during dinner,” Phil said, pulling back just enough to place his hands on Wilbur’s cheeks. “I’m sure you’re tired though, so you can go-”

“I’m not that tired at all,” Wilbur said, cutting Phil off, “I was actually wondering if we could, um, talk. You, me, and Techno.”

Forcing himself to say those words was like trying to punch through glass, but Wilbur knew he had been putting this off for too long. The glass was going to shatter, and his hands were going to be covered in cuts, but the barrier he’d put up between himself and his family was long overdue to break down.

Phil blinked in obvious surprise, but only hesitated for a moment before nodding. “Of course. Let’s go sit in the kitchen, and I’ll call Techno down.”

A few minutes later, Wilbur found himself sitting at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee warming his cold hands. Phil had poured it for him before going upstairs to get Techno from his room, and Wilbur's heart was pounding in his ears as he tried to think about what he was going to say.

The floorboards creaked behind him as Phil and Techno both made their way into the kitchen. There was a slight pressure on his shoulder, and Wilbur glanced up to see Techno standing above him. His brows were furrowed, but not in an angry way.

They stared at each other for a few moments in silence. Then, Techno dropped the hand, and went to sit down next to Phil, so they were both across from Wilbur.

"So you wanted to talk to us, Wil?" Phil started, his voice doing the gentle spooked animal thing again.

Shoving down his annoyance, Wilbur nodded, staring at the coffee in his mug. "Yeah. I, um-" he paused, frustration pushing up inside of him as he struggled to find the words he needed. His problems used to be that he had far too many words available to him at any time. Now, he was lacking when he needed them most. "Last night was... a bit of a mess."

Techno huffed. "You can say that again."

Phil lightly slapped Techno's arm, shooting him a scolding look before turning back to Wilbur. "It was partly my fault for asking you something you clearly weren't ready to answer, so I'm sorry about that, Wil."

Wilbur shook his head. "No, it's fine. You had no reason to think I'd react like that." He scrunched up his nose, the steam from the coffee warming his face. "Hell, I didn't even think I'd react like that."

"What did you do after you left the house?" Phil asked softly.

"I drove to Tommy's. For some reason I thought if we went and hung out somewhere it'd take my mind off things, but before I could even start driving us somewhere I ended up having a really bad panic attack." He took a sip of the coffee, the bitterness blending with the cream and sugar to soothe his raw throat. "Tommy helped me calm down, and then he took me up to his apartment since I was really out of it for a bit after that. Eventually, Techno called, and that's when we talked."

"Tommy is, uh, interesting," Techno muttered, and Wilbur snorted when he remembered Tommy's characteristic hostility to him over the phone.

"You can say he's an asshole. It's okay," Wilbur said, a small smile tugging at his lips.

"Well, you said it, not me," Techno shrugged. "But I can tell he also really seems to care about you."

Wilbur's grin grew a bit wider. "For some reason, yeah." There was another beat of silence as Wilbur let his smile then fade, his hands wrapping tighter around the mug. "You weren't



wrong though, Techno. About how I've been hanging out with Tommy as a way to avoid my problems."

Neither Phil or Techno said anything as Wilbur took a shaky breath to steady himself, blood still roaring in his ears.

"I guess last night made me kind of realize that I'm not dealing with my shit like I should be," Wilbur admitted, his voice low. "I guess I just... don't know how to do that. I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing here."

"I mean, I think we can agree you probably shouldn't go back to school next quarter," Techno said, and Wilbur found himself huffing out a laugh at his brother's bluntness.

"Yeah, that probably wouldn't be a great idea."

Another pause stretched the wire taut between the three of them. If one of them so much as leaned too far to one side, they were all going to be pulled down in one grand swoop.

"Can you tell us what's going on with school?" Phil asked, and Wilbur felt the wire tug against his ribcage. "Because clearly there's something going on there that I don't understand, and I want to know what's going through your head."

And Wilbur-

He opened his mouth, and the dam broke as words began to spill out.

He told them everything. The way he'd always felt left out of their conversations about classics, the idea he had that he had to finish his degree as soon as possible or else he'd be a disappointment—he even ended up dipping into the thoughts he'd had about how he figured he wasn't worth trying to pick up broken glass around their relationship.

It was like the words had just been waiting to be released. Once he started, he couldn't stop, and by the end of his rant his hands were shaking and his eyes were burning in a dangerous way.

"I just... I'm sick of being an outsider, but I didn't know how to stop feeling like that. So I thought if I had my own thing, I could be okay with that," he confessed, struggling to speak past the lump in his throat. "But then I started hating my thing. I hated my classes so much, but I couldn't give up. If I gave up I'd have nothing." Letting go of the mug, Wilbur dragged his hands down his face. "I feel like I'm fucking trapped in a rat maze or something," he mumbled between his fingers. "And that's why I downed that aspirin. I just wanted out."

As he finished that last sentence, a smothering silence that was all too familiar fell over the table. Wilbur didn't drop his hands from his face, because he didn't want to see the looks Phil and Techno were giving him.

A second passed. And then another.

There was the sound of a chair squeaking against tile. Footsteps moved close to him, and suddenly, warm arms were wrapping around Wilbur.

“You’ve never been a disappointment, Wil,” Phil whispered, leaning down to press his face into Wilbur’s hair. “I’m sorry if anything I’ve said or done has made you think that. But the reasons I’m proud of you have nothing to do with stupid fucking degrees or anything.”

Wilbur’s breathing hitched, and Phil kept talking.

“I’m proud of you because you’re passionate,” Phil told him, resting a hand on the back of his neck and rubbing small circles into the skin there. “You’re so fucking passionate about so many different things, and I love listening to you talk about it all. You’re also not afraid of new experiences, you literally went off and lived for a year on your own. I was so worried about you, but you weren’t worried at all. You just wanted to *experience*, and that’s a rare thing to find in a person.” A shudder ran through Wilbur as Phil hugged him tighter. “You’re also so goddamn clever. You can talk circles around people if you want, and that’s something Techno and I have never been able to do. It’s amazing to watch.”

Shit. Dammit. Wilbur didn’t want to cry again but then his dad had to go and say all of *that* and he could already feel the tears flowing down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been too good about reminding you how proud I am,” Phil continued, bringing a hand up to ruffle his hair. “But more than anything, I just want you to be happy. I don’t care what field you’re studying, or even if you don’t get a degree at all. I just want you to be happy with yourself and where you’re going.”

There was another hand on his shoulder, and when Wilbur glanced behind him, he saw Techno had moved his chair so he was sitting right next to him.

Techno didn’t say anything, but Wilbur could tell what he was conveying just with his eyes. When Wilbur reached out to grab Techno’s hand, Techno didn’t pull back, and instead squeezed his fingers with a grip so tight, it was almost painful.

The strings had finally gone slack. They were still there, tying the three of them together, but it wasn’t a painful reminder.

“What do you think about dropping out of college entirely?” Phil asked after a few minutes of silence, still hugging Wilbur.

Immediately, Wilbur’s stomach dropped. The idea of leaving all of it behind? What the hell else would he do if he wasn’t in school?

“I... I don’t know if I want to drop out. I’m not sure what I’d do otherwise,” Wilbur admitted.

“Well then,” Phil pulled back a bit, smiling down at him, “looks like we need to figure out what major you should switch to then.”

The relief that swelled in Wilbur’s chest hearing those words was surprising, but not unwelcome.

“Well...” Using his free hand, he wiped his face and took a breath to steady himself. “I’ve been really into reading poetry lately.”



Wilbur’s hair was ruffled by the cool breeze blowing across the rooftop, like the hand of some affectionate spirit was trying to mess with his curls.

His boots scuffed for purchase against the roof he was sitting on. He stared out at the skyline of dark houses, golden light spilling from the windows and illuminating perfectly manicured lawns. His fingers twitched for a cigarette, but he didn’t have any in his pocket. Instead, he tapped on the nicotine patch on his arm, willing it to work better.

“Have you enrolled in classes for the fall?”

Turning his head, Wilbur saw Niki smiling at him, her faded pink hair flying around her face against the wind. There was no judgement in her steely grey eyes. Just plain, gentle curiosity.

“Still working out with my counselor what I’m going to take, but I should be enrolling in a few days,” Wilbur said, wrapping his jacket tighter around himself. “What about you? You’re graduating in a month, right?”

Niki huffed. “Yeah, I am.”

“Are you excited?” Wilbur asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Honestly... I’m a little terrified,” Niki admitted, tucking a strand of cotton candy hair behind her ear. “But I’m also excited. I’ve already got a job lined up at a bakery. Running books and all the numbers shit.”

Wilbur snorted. “Business. Sounds boring as hell.” Scooting closer, he nudged her side with his elbow. “At least you’ll get free pastries though.”

“True. The pastries better be worth it,” she joked, fingers tapping along her arm. “But what about you? You’re switching majors, right?”

“Yeah, I am. Gonna switch to English literature with an emphasis on creative writing.”

Niki hummed. “What are you gonna do with that?”

“Not sure yet. I got at least a year and a half to figure it out though, since I basically have to start from scratch with my degree requirements,” Wilbur explained, snorting a bit. “I like writing though. Poetry, song lyrics, that type of stuff. So I’m excited to do more of that.”

“I didn’t know you liked poetry,” Niki said, dark brows furrowing together.

“I didn’t know I did either, until a friend of mine recommended some poetry books to me,” Wilbur explained, grinning as he remembered Tommy shoving three different poetry books at him during a shift.

There was a pause as Niki shifted beside him. The wind continued to howl along the rooftop, and he felt her gaze lingering on his face, as if she was analyzing every bit of him she could see.

“I’m glad your friend did that,” she told him. “I can’t remember the last time you looked this happy talking about school.”

Happy. Yeah, Niki was right. It was foreign for Wilbur to actually be excited about something related to his classes, but he *was*. For the first time in a long time, there was no dread pooling in his gut as he talked about his future plans. He was just... content.

“I’m glad you went out with us today,” Niki then said, nudging his shoulder with her own. “Quackity, Fundy, Eret, Jack—we’ve all missed you a lot.”

The dinner hadn’t been nearly as bad as Wilbur had thought it would be. While he didn’t go into the full details of what happened several months back to make him drop out of his classes, when he said it was related to his mental health, his friends had understood immediately. After that, the conversation had moved on to all the latest developments in their friend group Wilbur had missed, and at one point Jack made him laugh so hard he nearly choked on a piece of shrimp.

“I’ve missed you guys too,” Wilbur told her. “I’m sorry I just kind of disappeared and left you to deal with the rest of them. You were just the only person who knew what was going on and I didn’t really want to have to talk about it at the time.”

“I appreciate the apology, but I’m not that upset about it. You were dealing with a lot at the time,” she reassured him with a small smile. “I’m just glad you’re back with us all now.”

Wilbur was glad too. He had missed his friends more than he realized, and it was like a weight off of his chest to finally see them again.

But there was still one thing nagging in the back of his mind.

“Uh, actually, I was wondering something,” Wilbur began, pushing his hair out of his eyes. “Next time we all hang out, is it okay if I bring a friend?”

Niki raised an eyebrow. “Sure, I’m sure no one will mind. Who is it?”

“His name’s Tommy. He works at the bookstore with me, and we’re actually gonna be roommates soon,” Wilbur explained, lips curling into a smile without even thinking about it.

When Wilbur decided he was ready to enroll in classes again for fall, he talked with Phil and Techno about his living situation. Because while it was entirely possible for him to stay at his dad’s and commute, he also liked having his own space to live in. Even if the house was no longer as suffocating as it had once been, he wanted his own place to breathe.

Tommy’s lease with his shitty apartment was nearing its end. With a roommate, he could afford a much better place to stay. So it only felt right for Wilbur to ask if he’d want to live together, and of course Tommy said yes.

“Oh really?” Niki asked, blinking in surprise. “Does he go to the university?”

“Not at the moment, but he’s thinking about applying for the next cycle.”

Tommy hadn’t planned on going to university, although he was definitely interested in it. He had assumed he wouldn’t be able to afford it, but when Wilbur had pulled up the financial aid website, they both quickly realized that because of Tommy’s familial situation, it’d be very likely that he’d get a full ride or close to it.

“I’m gonna let him tag along with me to some of my literature classes in the fall,” Wilbur continued. “Let him see if he likes it and all.”

“That’s really cool,” Niki said, grinning at him. “I’m really excited to meet him.”

“I’m really excited for you guys to meet him too.” He paused, an idea lighting up in his mind. “Maybe we should also invite Techno to hang out with all of us. You’re friends with him, and I know he’s met Eret and Quackity before at least.”

“That’s a great idea!” Niki exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “Y’know, I always worry about him spending too much time hunched over his books. He needs to get out more.”

Wilbur snorted. “You’re right. He’s a bit of a loser.”

“I didn’t mean it like that!” Niki protested, slapping his arm lightly. “Anyway, it’s settled then. I can invite Techno, and you’ll bring Tommy, and we’ll all go to a Korean barbecue place or something.”

“That sounds really good to me,” Wilbur said, and he was surprised at how genuinely he meant that.

Things weren’t perfect. Wilbur still had bad days where all he wanted to do was lay in his bed and hide from the rest of the world. He still got panic attacks when he thought too far into the future. He still had to fight the urge to ignore the text notifications on his phone, and had to make a real effort to keep from isolating himself from everyone around him.

But it was getting easier. His therapist said he was making great progress, and for the first time since he started seeing her, he believed her.

A few minutes of silence passed between them. It wasn’t long before Niki pushed to her feet, hands out to her sides as she balanced walking over the roof.

“I’m heading down now,” Niki said, looking back over her shoulder at him. “Are you gonna stay up here?”

Wilbur debated it. He stared at the faint lights of houses on the skylines, the wind making goosebumps rise along his arms now that Niki wasn’t sitting next to him anymore.

“Nah, I’ll come with you.”

Pushing to his feet, he followed her to the fire escape, and together they climbed back down to the ground.

## Chapter End Notes

and thus... we have come to an end

no, this isn't a 'perfect' ending. wilbur has improved, but he's still got a long ways to go. he and tommy are still somewhat codependent on each other, and that's not going to be something that's going to just go away super easily. but he's on the road to improvement, and that's what's important :)

I hope you guys enjoyed this fic! it really meant a lot to write, and the reception to it has been so so kind. please let me know what you thought down in the comments below, they really make my day <3

I have a playlist for this fic! go check it out [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

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